

Donors for democracy? Philanthropy and the challenges facing America in the twenty-first century

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Abstract After the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, a self-defined “resistance” movement arose to block his agenda. This movement cut across the normal boundaries of political activism to create new forms of advocacy and new models of cooperation. Major components of the resistance were ideological interest groups, women’s organizations, environmentalists, heretofore disengaged Millennials, racial and ethnic groups, community nonprofits, and, ostensibly, foundations and leading philanthropists—those we term “patrons.” We systematically examine the behavior of patrons to determine what role they played at this unique time in American history. We place this research in the context of interest group behavior, asking how patrons may have facilitated representation, altered strategic plans, reoriented advocacy, and repositioned themselves within policy communities supporting similar goals. Our findings undermine the idea that patrons played a central role in the developing resistance to the new administration, despite the fact that the new president was working against their values and the programs they support. However, a non-trivial minority of patrons, both institutional and individual, did mobilize their voice, institutional resources, and coalitions to resist the Trump agenda. These examples allow us to explore how patrons in some conditions might fulfill the roles of interest groups conventionally understood.

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Introduction

The inauguration of Donald J. Trump as president of the USA sparked a self-styled “resistance” movement encompassing mass protests (Fisher et al. 2017), social media activism, pressure campaigns aimed at lawmakers, civil litigation, and the emergence of thousands of locally rooted political groups. Beginning even before the inauguration, the movement was preparing to block anticipated attempts by the new administration to crack down on immigrants and refugees, repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), undermine the nation’s commitments on global climate change, remove protections for people of color and LGBT individuals, use the presidency to benefit Trump business interests, and install White House aides and Cabinet secretaries of dubious qualifications. As everyday Americans mobilized to resist through new and existing organizations, a question emerged: Would big money follow?

In politics, big money typically refers to flows of resources to candidates, party organizations, and political action committees. However, another significant stream of resources merits attention: money flowing from wealthy donors and foundations to charitable nonprofit and advocacy organizations seeking to influence politics and the policy process. Once seen as passive “patrons” of civil society, these donors increasingly are embracing active roles as “policy entrepreneurs” (Reckhow 2013) and “drivers” of top-down strategies (Fleishman 2007) to formulate and promote policy ideas, influence public agendas, create and sustain think tanks and activist organizations, finance issue-specific Super PACs and candidates, and support novel approaches to implementing policy and measuring its impact. A decade ago, Fleishman (2007) likened big foundations to interest groups. The present moment provides an opportunity to assess whether philanthropies and their largest donors do act as such by advocating for issues and constituencies threatened in the current political environment.

There are a priori reasons to expect institutional and individual donors to step forward as representatives of issue and constituency interests, but there are also reasons to expect donors to hold back. Donors might be expected to speak out, first, because they *want to do so*. Like other political actors, donors have purposive interests in supporting causes to which they are committed. Beyond that, donors might speak out because they *can*. As privileged individuals and institutions, philanthropists would be expected to have exceptional civic skills and resources (Verba et al. 1995); enjoy freedom from market and electoral constraints (Fleishman 2007; Frumkin 2006; Reich 2016); possess large stockpiles of political capital (Callahan 2017; Freeland 2012; Vogel 2014); and have the opportunity to deploy funding mechanisms that allow them to remain hidden from public scrutiny (Callahan 2017; Mayer 2016; Reich 2016).

On the other hand, there are reasons that big philanthropy, even on the progressive side, might choose to resist the resistance. Philanthropists—particularly foundations—face legal restrictions on giving to advocacy groups and electoral



organizations. Furthermore, they are influenced by norms that can discourage them from any giving that could provoke a political or personal backlash. And, finally, big donors are facing a crisis of moral legitimacy as neo-populist waves—which carried the insurgent campaigns of Trump on the right and Sen. Bernie Sanders on the left—cast elites, experts, and their “solutions” as divorced from the lives of everyday Americans.

This study examines two groups of big donors—grantmaking foundations and individual philanthropists—as they figure out whether and how to join the resistance movement arising out of the 2016 election. These donors have hundreds of billions of dollars at their disposal, powerful networks, and stockpiles of political capital. If deployed well, these vast resources can allow elite donors to have an outsized influence on the direction of the movement and the country. Recent works have raised troubling questions about how big philanthropy fuels civic and political inequality (Callahan 2017; Freeland 2012; Mayer 2016; Vogel 2014). This study looks at the political inequality question from a different angle: Will philanthropy use its financial and moral resources to defend policy approaches, constituencies, and norms threatened by the administration? While scholars have examined patrons in established democracies (Goss 2006; Hammack 1999; Jenkins and Halcli 1999; Nielsen 1989; O’Connor 1999; Teles 2012; Walker 1991; Weaver 1967) and in nations seeking to become democracies (Quigley 1997; Herrold 2014), we focus on how patrons operate in a third setting: an established democracy whose liberal, pluralist traditions are under strain. Will these patrons be donors for democracy?

We are especially interested in whether philanthropy, should it choose to defend interests under threat, will opt to do this work in public view. Our study is of course constrained by the fact that donors can do much of their work in secret; thus, we cannot claim to be providing an unbiased sample (or census) of philanthropy’s response to the election. We acknowledge that our inability to see “dark money” limits the conclusions we can draw here, and to the extent possible we include information on dark money that has come to light through press accounts. We also seek to understand hidden dynamics by conducting “on background” interviews with foundation leaders. These interviews lend considerable insight into donors’ strategic thinking in the wake of Donald Trump’s election. Briefly, our evidence shows that the response of foundations and individual patrons to the Trump administration was muted, at least initially. There were notable exceptions but, overall, big philanthropy was not a significant component of the resistance in the early months. In the pages that follow, we document the behavior of foundations and leading donors and place their behavior within the context of interest group politics.

Are patrons interest groups?

A long literature, largely neglected by mainstream social science, has examined the roles that philanthropic patrons, whether individual or institutional, play in pluralist democracy. A sanguine view holds that patrons are critical to democracy: developing and promoting innovative approaches to public problems (Fleishman 2007); providing forums for the expression of individual values and



voice (Frumkin 2006); and supporting collective action by underrepresented groups (Berry 1999; Goss 2007; Jenkins and Halcli 1999; O'Connor 1999). To critics, however, patrons constitute “bastions of unaccountable power” (Ravitch 2010) who “weaponize philanthropy” to advance personal agendas (Mayer 2016). On this view, “imperious” patrons (Barkan 2011) impose their preferences on the public and its elected representatives (Herbert 2014) and exacerbate civic inequality (Callahan 2017). Although the sanguine and critical perspectives differ on the benefits of elite philanthropy, they agree that these actors are politically consequential and, in fact, act as interest groups—organizations that try to influence government (Berry and Wilcox 2018, 5).

Since we know that patrons do act as advocates, our questions search deeper into their behavior as interest groups. As organizations that try to influence policy, what about these patrons might fit into what we know about interest groups? Alternatively, what about their behavior might stand apart from the generalizations we find in the literature on interest groups? With this in mind, we ask about patrons' resistance to the Trump administration or, alternatively, their support for the administration. Did patrons with stakes in the policy changes being discussed at the early stage of the administration actively try to influence public policymaking? If so, how? What opportunities did they seize, and what constraints did they face?

Here we consider the behavior of patrons along four dimensions of interest group activity.

Representation

Axiomatically, interest groups represent interests. These interests may be formal members, non-member constituency groups, or even diffuse public interests as conceived by the organization. By funding civil society organizations, patrons may indirectly “represent” the interests championed by those groups. Here we examine whether funders step out of the shadows to directly embrace the interest representation function typically assumed by their grantees. We also examine whether funders identify and elevate interests that are underrepresented in the public square.

Strategy

We typically think of interest groups as rational actors—organizations that utilize their resources in the most effective and efficient manner to achieve their most valued priorities. Part of this process is for them to think critically about the future and to update plans to achieve their objectives as the policymaking environment around them changes. This strategic planning is complicated, of course, by the lack of control over government policymaking. Still, interest groups obsessively monitor their environment; and when something as significant as an unexpected election outcome emerges, reconsideration of existing priorities and practices is virtually sure to follow (Heinz et al. 1993). Our focus here is to ask if patrons began the process of reorienting their strategies, or chose to stay the course, after Trump's 2016 victory.



Reactive capacity

Strategizing over long-term goals is one thing, while quickly reacting to new threats and opportunities is another. Surely no more than a day had passed after Donald Trump's election before oil and gas interests began to formulate lobbying efforts to get their friends appointed to top regulatory positions, prioritize regulations they wanted overturned, and identify those with connections to the Trump inner circle who would be good to hire. Similarly, how long did it take for liberal judicial groups to start organizing after it was announced that Justice Scalia had died? A couple of hours? Thus, capacities for "thinking, fast and slow" represent dual tests for interest groups (Kahneman 2011). Reacting to what is happening day-to-day must complement effective long-term strategizing.

Policy communities

None of the patrons we track, including behemoths like the Bill and Melinda Gates and Ford Foundations, can advance important changes in policy by themselves. Even in education, one of the clearest examples where they have been important players, foundations work together and in concert with interest groups and policymakers (Reckhow and Snyder 2014; Reckhow 2013). Positions within policy communities vary greatly, from central leadership to the periphery of the network. Policy communities may be slow-moving giants, but they do move over time as strategies adjust to evolving constraints and opportunities. How dynamic are foundations and their funders in relation to the policy communities within which they operate? More fundamentally, are they leaders or followers?

A central challenge to research on foundations is that they go out of their way to communicate that they are not politically oriented. They have been deft at selling this narrative. In a sense "politics" dirties the sheen of virtue that defines the image foundations promote. When seen as benevolent institutions, foundations escape the public scrutiny that might otherwise facilitate insight into their spending habits. Foundations also want to be viewed as unique institutions, bridging the worlds of commerce and civic affairs. They see themselves as dynamic visionaries, establishing best practices through ambitious but rigorously evaluated projects. Above all, they want to catalyze innovation and impact.

The unique legal status of foundations also plays a role in inhibiting advocacy. Foundations were created as a way of diverting wealth into tax-sheltered entities that could exist into perpetuity if so desired. But there was also mistrust of the very concept of a foundation, institutions created by the wealthy that would be advantaged in the tax code. As the legal form evolved in law, foundations were restricted by government in ways that ostensibly prevent funds from being spent on non-charitable endeavors, including political activity (Reich et al. 2016). Foundations were willing to accept this trade-off, as they were not formed to be political and their donors benefited from being able to funnel their fortunes into tax-advantaged vehicles.



Yet like most nonprofits, foundations exaggerate the restrictions that government places on them (Berry and Arons 2003). They can actually donate funds for advocacy, though they need to describe such grants as for general expenses rather than earmarking funds for lobbying. The Internal Revenue Service does very little to monitor the behavior of nonprofits, even though they all are subsidized by taxpayers. A small minority of foundations have been outspoken about what they see as their right to be politically active. In general, however, foundations are not eager to revisit this trade-off as they fear more government oversight and, thus, prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. For many small family foundations, the preference is to remain opaque so that internal processes can remain casual and relatively unrestricted.

The universal and deeply felt respect for philanthropy has surely benefitted foundations by creating space for them to identify gaps in the interest group system and provide the strategic leadership, as well as the money, to help fill these spaces. For example, the Ford Foundation played a key role in establishing and ensuring the long-term maintenance of the modern civil rights and consumer rights infrastructures (Fleishman 2007); and the Olin Foundation and other conservative funders did the same for the ecosystem of right-leaning think tanks and litigation organizations (Teles 2012). Recent literature tells us that contemporary philanthropies are increasingly embracing these models (Bishop and Green 2008; Callahan 2017).

Despite their claims that they are not lobbies, indeed that they transcend politics, we agree with Reckhow (2016) that foundations are “more than patrons.” From the viewpoint of interest group scholarship, foundations are not that unusual in their structure or role. Most lobbies are institutions, not associations of members (Schlozman et al. 2015). What interest groups have in common, then, is not an organizational structure but a function—representing a constituency and a set of ideas. These constituencies and ideas may be narrow (e.g., a corporation working to change a regulation) or broad (e.g., an environmental lobby working on behalf of the public to slow global climate change). Legally, foundations represent the intent of donors. Practically, though, foundations represent the targets of their beneficence. In this regard, many foundations represent the most disadvantaged among us. And some foundations, with great fortunes at their disposal, have the capacity to change lives by influencing policy. How well foundations, large and small, represent their constituents is the normative question that underlies the empirical ones we investigate here.

Data and methods

The impact of the Trump years upon philanthropy will surely be a subject of future research that will use an array of tools and allow for multiple perspectives on how these early months may have influenced longer-term responses. Here, though, we use the methods available to develop the first chapter of this longer history. The initial phase of the research systematically examined foundation behavior from January 20, 2017, until April 2017. The review of individual donors extended until the end of May 2017. A second phase took place in the fall of the same year, and our interviews were conducted during this later period.



These were turbulent times, with daily controversies over policies such as immigration and health care, as well as larger questions about the President's fitness to govern and the health of American democracy itself. For most large foundations and for many individual philanthropists, President Trump represented a deep yet unexpected threat to the very purpose of their efforts. Although foundations may not have prepared for Trump's election in early November 2016, they did have more than two months to formulate their plans by the time our data collection began in late January 2017.

A major part of our efforts was gathering data on 40 large US-based foundations. We began by examining the 20 largest foundations in terms of annual grantmaking.¹ To broaden our research beyond these top 20 behemoths, we drew a stratified sample of another 20 foundations that fell between #30 and #500 in size, again measured by grant expenditures.

We began the research with a deep dive into each foundation's website, focusing on sections that provided an overview of the foundation, described different programs being funded that had relevance to national public policy, offered news about the foundation that was collected from outside sources, showed letters and statements from the foundation leadership, or presented announcements regarding new and existing programming. We also gathered public statements by the CEO of the foundation, its board chair, and any legacy funder (i.e., Bill Gates) who was still active in public affairs. These materials consisted of interviews, speeches, or articles about them in the press. Finally, we looked at the tweets produced by the foundation and its CEO during the initial 3-month period of the new administration. We take tweets only for what they are: signals about current attitudes along with links to more substantive documents. Tweets were supplemental to the websites and formal statements by leaders, but we considered them relevant in that they provided immediate windows into donor thinking.

To move beyond the public statements of foundations, we conducted interviews with grantmakers to assess strategic thinking about the future path of their philanthropies in the Trump era. The subjects were CEOs or program managers, individuals who could tell us authoritatively where the foundations were headed and if there had been any significant change in direction. These were elite interviews, utilizing semistructured questioning that allowed interviewers the latitude to probe and to add questions where advisable. Respondents could speak in depth, which offered detail and context.² The subjects were leaders of either large national foundations or of foundations in the Boston area. Both sets of interviewees were samples of convenience, and we were pointed toward some subjects by informants we consulted. The

¹ These foundations were selected based on giving totals for the most recent year available (2014) in the Foundation Center's ranking. The Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation was excluded as it is strictly a scholarship fund and has no significant web presence. The Richard F. Aster Foundation was also excluded as it does not have an active website. We substituted the next two largest foundations, The Rockefeller Foundation and the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation, to maintain this group at 20. Atlantic Philanthropies, which was among the top 20 in 2014, spent down its endowment and was no longer in existence when we began our research.

² The interview protocol is available at the authors' websites.



Boston-area philanthropies added some diversity to the foundations studied in the first phase as only a few of them are large enough to have been included in the original database.

In addition to including some smaller foundations to those in the pool in the earlier research, the elite interviews offered at least four benefits. First, by returning to the field roughly 5 months later, we were able to determine if our initial results were time bound. Did foundations eventually begin to act more forcefully to protect the program representing their core values? Second, we spoke with subjects on background—a promise of no identifying quotations from them or their organization—which helped us determine if there is a second face of foundation behavior. We hypothesized that a good deal of activity was happening behind the scenes, either because of the funder’s preexisting preference to put the spotlight on grantees or because the foundation feared antagonizing the administration or otherwise inviting a political backlash. Third, we hoped to gain insight into funders’ private, post-election deliberations and the strategic choices that ensued in the near term. Finally, this additional method allowed for a validation of results, adding confidence to our conclusions if findings pointed in the same direction.

Beyond institutional foundations, we also reviewed the publicly visible activities of more than 100 individuals, couples, and families identified by Goss (2016) as “policy plutocrats.” Compared to bureaucratic foundations, these individual patrons have fewer legal restrictions on their political giving. They also face fewer organizational constraints on the exercise of their public voice—there are no trustees from which to seek approval, for example. Thus, it was important to include individual, policy-oriented donors in the sample. Focusing on institutional philanthropy could negatively bias the analysis by neglecting the patronage of those who, formally at least, have greater room to maneuver. The policy plutocrats represent a subset ($n = 105$) of America’s most prominent philanthropists; these donors may be individuals, couples, or families with integrated giving.³ Prior to the election, this subset had sought to influence the policy-making process in a publicly identifiable way by “(1) conducting and disseminating policy-relevant research; (2) shaping or amplifying public opinion; (3) subsidizing organizations working for policy change through

³ The process of identifying the 105 “policy plutocrats” was as follows. First, Goss compiled a list of America’s leading philanthropists from three sources: “(1) The Giving Pledge, through which people of wealth publicly self-identify as intending to donate more than half of their wealth during their lifetime (givingpledge.org); The Philanthropy 50, a yearly list compiled by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* of the most generous charitable donors (data are for 2012, 2013, 2014; bequests are excluded); and foundations that made the Foundation Center’s Top 100 lists of the largest philanthropies (by assets and by grants) and had the donor(s) at the helm” (Goss 2016, 444). These donors’ philanthropic activities were then examined using public sources, including press accounts, websites, and Form 990 informational tax returns. From these sources, Goss identified a subgroup of policy-oriented donors who met one of these conditions: “(1) identified one of [the five policy process] goals in their Giving Pledge; (2) gave at least one \$100,000 grant from their private foundation, in the most recent reporting year, to further a policy goal; (3) identified public policy interests on their foundation or personal website; (4) contributed any amount to a campaign organization oriented around a specific policy issue (e.g., abortion rights) between 2010 and mid-2015; or (5) were publicly identified as having founded a policy-advocacy organization” (Goss 2016, 445). The list of donors is current as of May 2016.



the legislative, executive, or judicial branch; (4) intentionally providing models for new ways that government can deliver public services (e.g., K–12 education); or (5) partnering with government to reconfigure public spaces” (Goss 2016, 445).

We reviewed public sources to assess these donors’ post-election activities. We were interested in how these donors exercised their democratic voice and what interests they sought to represent or defend. We defined “voice” broadly to include philanthropic donations, associational activity, and public statements critical or supportive of the administration. Our data were compiled from a systematic sweep of media accounts (compiled by Lexis-Nexis, Google, and Google News) and the Twitter feeds of donors and their foundations.

This article is about donors’ response to the new administration—positive, negative, or neither—but understanding the findings requires some context about these donors’ ideological composition—a “prior,” as it were. On the individual side, the donors are roughly evenly divided, according to their publicly reported donations to candidates and political committees between 2010 and 2015 (Goss 2016). About one-third of the donors strongly or exclusively favored Democrats; one-third strongly or exclusively favored Republicans; and one-third either gave to both parties or did not give at all. We might expect some of the non-committal, bipartisan, and even conservative donors to join their liberal counterparts given the well-documented “never Trump” movement among the elite class (Tanenhaus 2017).

Among the largest 20 foundations and the 20 foundations in the stratified sample, there is a more liberal orientation. We coded politically salient keywords in these foundations’ mission statements (e.g., “free market,” “progressive”), as well as coding the ideological direction of foundation grantmaking in nine issue spheres (environment, women’s rights and empowerment, health care, education, immigration, poverty, race and diversity, free market approaches, and civic engagement). A detailed explanation of general coding of ideological tilt and coding on the nine issue areas is available on the authors’ websites. Whatever the subtleties involved in such coding, the liberal tilt is strong and unambiguous.

Of the 20 largest foundations in the USA, fully 75% embody a liberal orientation. Just one foundation, Templeton, leans in a conservative direction. Of these 20 foundations, 9 indicate an ideological predisposition in a mission statement on their website and, of these, 8 identify liberal goals (with Templeton on the opposite side). Among the mid-sized foundations (from our stratified sample of #30 to #500 in giving), again just 1 (5%) leans conservative. Fully 40% tilt liberal, and the remainder do not offer programming that can be defined in ideological terms (See Table 1). These findings are consistent with those of Nagai et al. (1994, 129), who found that two-thirds of large foundations making public policy grants did so primarily to liberal causes, compared to fewer than one in five foundations that gave primarily to conservative causes. Given this ideological disposition, we might expect foundations to be highly engaged in supporting the resistance.

There are conservative grantmakers—the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the group of Scaife funds, and the Searle Freedom Trust, for example—but their limited presence in the different samples of foundations studied here may reflect sound reasoning by conservative philanthropists who see more efficient routes for achieving their goals than starting or enhancing a conventional foundation. The liberal



Table 1 Ideological tilt of foundations (% by foundation type)

	20 largest foundations	20 mid-sized foundations
Liberal	75	40
Conservative	5	5
Mixed	20	0
Nonpolitical, unclear	0	55
	100	100

For the largest 20 foundations, measurement of ideological tilt is derived from their publicly stated values and from discrete coding of programming in nine different policy areas (Environment; Women's Rights; Health Care; K-12 Education; Immigration; Poverty; Race; Promoting Free Market Economics; and Civic Engagement, Democracy, Strengthening Media). For each foundation, an aggregate score was created and a code of liberal or conservative required a minimum of 75% of programs embodying those ideological values. (Foundations were only scored in areas they had programming; hence, no programming does not factor into their overall score.) No minimum number of programs was required for each foundation's score. The liberal and conservative definitions used to code each of the nine programming areas is available in the codebook, which can be found on the authors' websites along with the data files for the largest twenty and mid-sized foundations. We also looked at the mission statements of these foundations, though not all articulated their goals in ideological terms. The mission statements confirmed the policy coding. For the mid-sized foundations, the scoring followed the same definitions for the nine programming areas. However, many of these smaller foundations were committed to supporting programs that weren't liberal or conservative (i.e., promoting Jewish values or funding for the arts). Others were opaque on minimalist websites and, as a consequence, could not be coded in terms of ideological leanings. These smaller foundations typically concentrate in only a few areas and, as a result, we made an overall judgment based on the information available rather than scoring individual program areas and computing an overall percentage

Ford Foundation continues to try to find ways to best fight poverty, and its use of seed funding for new approaches has been a fruitful strategy. In contrast, if you're a contemporary conservative donor and you want to get government out of the poverty-fighting business, it may make most sense to direct your available funds to political candidates committed to shrinking the size of government. Although they head family foundations, conservative mega donors such as Sheldon Adelson and Richard Uihlein have focused their recent giving on Super PACs and other campaign vehicles. Adelson contributed at least \$45 million in the 2016 campaign; by May of 2018, Uihlein had already contributed \$25 million to various conservative Super PACs and candidates (Schleifer 2016; Narayanswamy et al. 2018).

By way of summary, we draw on five distinct databases that we have developed: a detailed review of foundation websites; a compilation of public statements by foundation leaders; a reading of social media (tweets) by foundation leaders during the first 3 months of the Trump administration; interviews with foundation executives;



and an assessment of public utterances by policy plutocrats. These data may not capture all that we need to know about foundations and individual patrons, but the breadth offers substantial insight into their behavior. Adding to our confidence is that all five data sources point in the same direction in terms of findings.

Findings

For these first nine months or so of the Trump administration, our central finding is that most elite donors, whether institutional or individual, chose not to exercise their democratic voice in a publicly visible way. By and large, these patrons did not initiate grant programs, forge new associational initiatives, or issue statements of support or concern about the administration's agenda. At first glance, we might conclude that patrons remain private actors in the civil society sphere. Although they clearly have policy and political interests—as investors in causes and constituency groups, as targets of public policy, and as holders of beliefs and values—most did not take the opportunity to publicly advance or defend these interests. Below we present these findings, but we also demonstrate that there were prominent exceptions. Further, we recognize that some donors may be doing significant grantmaking behind the scenes (Callahan 2018). Using these anomalous institutions and individuals, we argue patrons can choose to organize themselves and assume roles that make them the functional equivalent of an interest group.

Finding 1: mobilization of resources

The patterns that emerge from the data could not be stronger. Most broadly, we asked if foundations and individual philanthropists responded to the challenges that the Trump administration's policies and proposals pose to donors' programming and values. We take these patrons in turn.

Almost all of the largest foundations in the USA are progressive in the sense that what they advocate requires a large and active government that uses its regulatory powers and its financial resources to solve significant problems. What Trump, his top aides, and Cabinet members proposed on health care, climate change, race, civil liberties, income inequality and many other issues ran counter to the purpose of the grants these foundations distribute.

Of the 20 largest foundations that were publicly researchable, only one (the California Endowment) said it was open now to receiving applications from nonprofits wanting to challenge the administration (See Table 2). The silence of the other foundations concerning the Trump administration was notable. It is not only their programs that are threatened by the new administration but also, in many cases, their *raison d'être*. No foundation is more identified with improving health care than is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, but its website contained no word on the administration's repeated attempts to repeal the ACA even months into a concerted attack. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation emphasize environmental protection, but they projected no worry



Table 2 Foundations' response to the Trump administration. Website materials and foundation tweets

	Website materials		Tweets	
	Critical (%)	Supportive (%)	Critical (%)	Supportive (%)
Largest 20	5	0	35	0
Stratified 20	5	0	20	0

“Critical” and “Supportive” are measures of any article, posting, or program announcement that makes reference to the Trump administration and indicates that the foundation is acting at least in part to counteract the administration’s policies or, conversely, to support administration policies. These counts exclude statements by leadership articulating their views—see Tables 3 and 4 for those. The figures in columns 1 and 2 are coded only from content referencing foundation programming, current or planned. For tweets, the accounts reviewed for the calculations here belong to those of the foundation itself (i.e., @Gatesfoundation). As the table suggests, most foundations did not make either a critical or a supportive reference to the new administration

that their goals were fundamentally threatened by the new administration. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation works on racial divisions, but its website was silent in the face of the Trump administration’s hostility toward government programs and policies aimed at protecting disadvantaged minorities. And so it goes.

These findings raised the question of whether very large foundations were unusual in their response. It was possible that these behemoths were outliers, run by establishment boards inclined not to challenge the power structure now or even down the road. Perhaps less prominent foundations would behave differently. This hypothesis led us to consider an additional 20 foundations stratified to reflect the full range of donors from the 30th to the 500th largest by grantmaking. In profiling these organizations what stood out is, understandably, that they have a narrower focus in their grantmaking. Many emphasize a single issue area. The arts (Windgate, Luce), Jewish values (Arison), and AIDS (M.A.C. AIDS Fund) are some examples. Others focus on their geographic home area, such as Mellon (Pittsburgh), Laurie M. Tisch (New York City), and Seedling (Austin). Only one of these second 20, the Barr Foundation, initiated a program to respond to Trump, designating \$2.4 million to support journalism in response “to dramatic shifts in the national context” (Canales 2017).

On the donor side, the findings are similar. Only a handful of donors—Bill and Melinda Gates, Amos and Barbara Hostetter, Pierre Omidyar, George Soros, and Tom Steyer—publicly indicated directly or through foundation leadership that they or their philanthropic organization would be dedicating new resources as a result of the election. Pierre Omidyar pledged \$100-million to shore up accountability journalism and fight fake news (Sullivan 2017), and, as noted above, the Hostetters’ Barr Foundation pledged new money for similar goals. The financier George Soros pledged \$10-million to track hate crimes. Bill and Melinda Gates, through their foundation, pledged to counter US government cuts in reproductive health



Table 3 Foundation leaders' response to the Trump administration (per website). Largest 20 foundations only

Leadership response on foundation website (4/20 foundations)	20%
Of these responses, percent critical of administration (4/4 foundations)	100%
Of these responses, percent where tone is hostile (3/4 foundations)	75%
Of these foundations with critical response, percent with programs in place or planned to combat Trump policies (0/4 foundations)	0%

Measurements derive from foundation website for statements by leadership. Statements can be from CEO, board chair, or legacy founder, but coding is only for each foundation overall. There were no cases of a foundation leader having a different point of view than other leaders of the same foundation. Overall tone was measured by calculating the percentage of paragraphs that were critical (or supportive) of the administration. "Hostile" was defined as content where more than half of the paragraphs were "clearly critical" of the administration. In turn, "clearly critical" was "language that is unmistakable in asserting that what the administration is doing is both wrong and damaging."

funding in developing countries. Meanwhile, the hedge fund billionaire Tom Steyer suggested that he was prepared to give large sums to combat the new administration, which he deemed "the most broad-based and dangerous attack on American values certainly that I have ever experienced in my lifetime and much more than I have ever imagined would happen while I'm alive" (McCormick and Allison 2017).

Finding 2: expression of voice

Both foundations and donors were generally reluctant to publicly challenge the new administration, or even to speak out approvingly. Callahan (2018) argues that big foundations "have taken extreme care not to make themselves a political target at a scary moment when the pitchforks have been out for 'elites.'" That said, expressions of voice were more common than the public announcement of new resources. A non-trivial fraction of foundations and donors chose to publicly challenge the direction of the Trump administration and to raise larger questions about the broader political situation.

Regarding the large foundations, the leaders from 20% of them posted to their websites some statement of opposition to Trump, as Table 3 shows. However, as noted above, none indicated a change in foundation programming (although the California Endowment was open to doing so).

Among the statements posted on foundation websites was one by the Simons Foundation, which stated that it opposed the Administration's proposed ban on travel from certain Muslim countries. In looking at tweets—admittedly a shallow measure of commitment—we also saw a different picture than what is reflected in the foundations' programs. Leaders (CEOs, board chairs, legacy founders) of 35% of the large foundations tweeted in some fashion opposition to Trump actions. Bill Gates, for example, tweeted a link to an article he had written opposing cuts in foreign aid. In the stratified sample of foundations, 20% sent out negative tweets.

When we looked at policy positions articulated outside the foundation website (interviews, articles about the foundations, etc.) for the leaders of the 20 largest



Table 4 Foundation leaders' response to the Trump administration (per additional sources). Largest 20 foundations only. Statements outside of the foundation website ($n=40$ leaders)

Statement made elsewhere beyond foundation website ($n=9/40$ leaders)	23%
Of these leaders, percent critical of administration ($n=7/9$ leaders)	78%
Of these leaders, percent favorable toward administration ($n=0/9$)	0%
Of these foundations, percent indicating foundation will start program soon to move against a Trump policy ($n=1/20$ foundations)	5%

A statement can take a variety of forms: a blog post, an article published under the leader's name, an interview, a journalistic article about the leader or one that is about the foundation and mentions the leader. The statement must address Trump policies or programs at least in part. Leaders included CEOs, board chairs, and founders

foundations, we also saw a modest amount of anti-Trump position taking, as Table 4 shows.

In short, all the evidence we have gathered for these 40 foundations points toward their holding strongly progressive values. When their leaders vocalize their own positions, they reflect the same political orientation. Yet the foundations themselves have stood back and for the most part have failed to project their voice in a way that defends values under attack by a new administration in Washington.

On the individual donor side, the results are similar. We assessed public statements promulgated through the Twitter feeds of those elite donors who maintained a personal or institutional feed, or both. Of the 105 donors in the sample, 48 had at least one of these types of feeds. Of those 48, half made no statement relating to the Trump agenda or the larger post-election political situation. Of those who did make a statement ($n=25$), most ($n=17$) were critical of the Trump administration, as we discuss below. The remaining donors were either supportive of the administration ($n=5$) or attempted to play their reaction down the middle ($n=3$). Supporters praised the administration for its economic policies, position toward Israel, and potential Supreme Court nominees; while donors in the middle typically praised policy positions while criticizing Cabinet choices. As Table 5 shows, the critical statements spanned a wide range of concerns.

Because not all donors use Twitter to communicate their views, we also conducted a systematic sweep of the traditional media for evidence of commentary or activity relating to the new administration. This inquiry turned up 39 donors who had taken a publicly reported position, and again, the modal response was critical ($n=17$, or 16% of all donors), as opposed to supportive ($n=15$, or 14%) or mixed/neutral ($n=7$, or 7%). In the "supportive" category, we see a number of donors who gave money to Trump-aligned organizations but did not speak out about it, which is consistent with the theory that billionaires practice "stealth politics" (Page et al. 2015; forthcoming). Looking at Twitter and media accounts together, roughly one-quarter of all individual donors spoke out negatively against Trump ($n=24$, or 23%), while a significant minority was supportive, either quietly or publicly ($n=17$, 16%), or mixed in their views ($n=9$, 9%).

Among donors who chose to exercise their civic voice, Trump critics tended to be more publicly vocal. For example, Nicolas Berggruen co-authored a piece in



Table 5 Policy plutocrats' critiques of Trump administration individual and institutional Twitter feeds ($n = 48$ donors), January 20, 2017–May 31, 2017. The percentages don't sum to 100 because feeds often contained more than one critique

Critique	% donors articulating critique
Democracy/pluralism/liberty	31
Climate change	25
Immigrants/travel ban	21
Governing competence	15
Foreign policy/aid	15
Education	13
Presidential temperament/character	10
Health care	6
Criminal justice	4

the *Washington Post* rejecting right-wing populism (Gardels and Berggruen 2017). Michael Bloomberg published op-eds on the need for reaching bipartisan consensus on health care reform and for honoring the Paris Agreement on climate change (Bloomberg 2017a, b). George Soros criticized the administration's immigration policies for encouraging hate crimes (Soros 2017). Bill Gates made the case for foreign aid amid the administration's plan to slash its budget (Gates 2017). Finally, although not in the form of an op-ed, Elon Musk indicated via Twitter that he had "done all I can to advise directly to POTUS, through others in WH & via councils, that we remain" in the Paris Agreement (Musk 2017).

In the narrowest sense, these tweets and op-eds constitute nothing more than the political expression of an individual's policy views. However, we see these statements as fulfilling two roles of interest groups: representation and education. In each of these cases, the patron purports to represent interests beyond his own, whether they be specific constituency groups (immigrants, those in need of health care), the national interest (foreign aid), or democracy itself (pluralism, bipartisan consensus). What makes these acts representational is that each of these individuals brings to the public square key political resources typically associated with interest groups: money, staff, networks, and reputational clout. Michael Bloomberg is not you, and Elon Musk is not me. They have more power to speak for others. The second interest group function observed in these tweets and op-eds is education. Op-eds constitute an especially effective public method of educating elected officials and the citizenry about policy concerns. As the data show, some patrons are also using private channels to conduct their educative function.

Finding 3: collective action

Patrons' exercise of public voice—whether through money or conventional speech—arguably constitutes an act of interest representation. Such acts may bear the name of an individual, but often they carry the clout of an organization. In this sense, they



constitute a thin form of collective action. However, patrons may engage in a thicker form of collective action by organizing among themselves to promote their conception of the public good. For example, foundations have long worked through “affinity groups” oriented around shared concerns, and these affinity groups have grown in number and become more institutionalized in their function. They are potentially important mechanisms for foundation “resistance” because many are independent public charities with broader latitude to conduct advocacy. What’s more, as umbrella groups they could shield any individual foundation from political controversy. On the individual donor side, we see the proliferation of networks that allow philanthropists to coordinate and focus their giving around shared ideological goals (Callahan 2017; Mayer 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Vogel 2014). The consolidation of foundations and individuals into formalized networks buttresses the argument that patrons are increasingly coming to resemble interest groups.

Again, however, we see a muted response to early threats posed by the administration. A scan of roughly 40 foundation affinity groups found few public statements relating to the election. When these statements appeared, they alluded vaguely to times of transition and change, professed affirmations of foundation values, and sometimes expressed hopes of fruitful partnerships between philanthropy and government—statements that might accompany any normal change in administration. Occasionally, one might see a statement opposing a Trump administration policy, such as the “global gag rule” on abortion (Funders Concerned About AIDS 2017), or a call for funders to counter “fake news” and other misinformation (Media Impact Funders 2017). The most prominent public case of collective action among foundations was a statement signed by dozens of organized philanthropies and affinity groups opposing the administration’s policies on immigration and refugees (Joint Foundation Statement 2017). By and large, we found little evidence of foundation collective action either through established affinity groups or through ad hoc collaboratives.

On the individual donor side, we likewise found little public evidence of collective organizing. The most notable exception was an effort by Michael Bloomberg to assemble and fund a coalition of leaders from the corporate, government, and non-profit sectors to continue to fulfill pledges made under the Paris Agreement, from which the Trump administration withdrew (Volcovici 2017). Also recognizing the power of collective action, billionaire Tesla founder Elon Musk publicly quit White House advisory councils to protest the administration’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (Ferris 2017).

Beyond our sample

We undertook this inquiry in part because the philanthropy press was reporting that foundations and their leaders were joining the resistance. Our goal was to systematically assess this claim to determine if foundations (as well as individual donors) in fact were mobilizing in significant ways to support causes dear to them. A precedent certainly existed. As investigative reporter Jane Mayer notes, Barack Obama’s 2008 election prompted Koch-affiliated donors to act “like a bunch of gorillas beating



their chests” and to immediately mobilize resources for a “permanent campaign” against the new administration (Mayer 2016, 22, 169). The Kochs’ political aide told a local newspaper that “every rock they overturned, they saw people who were against [the administration], and it turned out to be us” (Wilson and Wenzl 2012, quoted in Mayer 2016, 169). After conducting our systematic search, we returned to press accounts, especially in specialized publications that focus on the nonprofit sector (particularly *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *Inside Philanthropy*, and *Nonprofit Quarterly*’s daily compilation of philanthropy-related news).

This broader sweep of the nonprofit media reveals resistance funding that our data collection did not include. But the more inclusive view nonetheless reinforces the gist of our findings. The philanthropy press found a trend toward the mobilization of “rapid response” resources to counter the administration by some foundations (Callahan 2018). Such grants are designed to circumvent lengthy proposal-and-review processes and to exist outside of the common three-year funding cycles. Most conspicuous have been community foundations, such as the San Francisco Foundation, the Brooklyn Community Foundation, and the New York Community Trust, which supported immigrants and people of color (Dorfman et al. 2017); the Ms. Foundation for Women, the Harnisch Foundation, and the Colorado Women’s Foundation, which supported female empowerment (Berry 2017; Marek 2016); and the Security and Rights Collaborative, which supported groups defending Muslim communities (Security and Rights Collaborative 2018). Overall, what our review finds is that those foundations designating additional funding for resisting Trump are relatively small and grants are largely being doled out in modest sums to community nonprofits. We do not doubt the utility of supporting grassroots groups—all politics may not be local, but community activism is vital to changing the national dialogue. Still, in terms of trying to track what is going on nationally, the sums being spent by these groups are modest, and their contribution to capacity building within recipient nonprofits remains open to question. A methodological question also arises: How much of the newly announced money is truly *new* money? Redirecting fixed sums from existing programs that support similar goals may diminish the true value of the grants.

There are some large foundations that have jumped in, though we cannot be sure percentage-wise that they represent a significant jump beyond what we found for the period ending in late April 2017. After our initial sweep was completed, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation increased its commitment by \$63 million to some of the program areas threatened by Trump (Dorfman et al. 2017). The Rockefeller Brothers Fund said it was upping its funding by 12% in an effort “to protect and strengthen the vitality of our democracy” (Dorfman et al. 2017).

Finally, we note another study that has tried to systematically measure changing foundation priorities. The Center for Effective Philanthropy surveyed 162 foundations with minimum grantmaking of \$5 million annually (Buchanan and Buteau 2017). Taken in February and March of 2017, the survey found that 28% of respondents said they were modifying or planning to modify programmatic goals in light of the new administration. If we aggregate the responses of leaders to the more immediate responses of the foundations themselves, we come out near the same figure. One journalistic source found some increased movement over the course of the



year. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* initially concluded, in early March 2017, that “despite their alarm, few grant makers have taken immediate steps to modify or reallocate their giving” (Preston 2017); however, by mid-August, the *Chronicle* reported that major foundations had pledged “\$700-million and counting” in response to the election (Daniels 2017).

A word of caution is in order here. There is almost certainly more going on behind the scenes than is being reported publicly. Our sweeps will not pick up informal coordination among donors on common interests. Nor will this early analysis detect the full range of alterations in foundations’ grantmaking—these changes will become clearer with the release of funders’ Form 990-PF informational tax returns, which typically become public with a two-year lag. Revelations about individual donors will be more haphazard, often depending on media digging or donors’ willingness to be public. As noted, new work by Page et al. (2015, forthcoming) finds that billionaires engage in stealth politics, donating and bundling money to affect policy while tending not to speak publicly about their policy preferences. Hundreds of donors are united in giving consortia, such as the Koch network on the right and the Democracy Alliance on the left, whose activities are increasingly pivotal to party politics yet are conducted in secret (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016). Thus, important political work by individual donors remains beyond view. We recognize these limitations, and as the next section details, we have conducted interviews in part to work around them. However, we maintain that taking a public stance is integral to resistance work; giving privately is important but doing so publicly may magnify the political impact. With a few key exceptions, prominent philanthropies and donors opted to battle threats to their values quietly or not at all, at least in the administration’s early months.

Election 2016: what donors “heard”

Our interviews with a convenience sample of foundation leaders help us understand how donors interpreted the election and how they processed the strategic options presented to them. Mirroring philanthropy as a whole, the key informants were progressive in their political orientation and viewed the election, as well as the underlying dynamics that it dramatized, with a sense of alarm. Their response to that alarm varied, however. And the variation in responses sheds light on the limits of envisioning foundations as interest groups.

Consistent with the behavior of interest groups, some early donors developed strategies and mobilized their reactive capacity to fight the new administration and its agenda. While this agenda did not initially include proposals that would undermine foundations directly, progressive donors saw the constituencies and values they represent to be gravely imperiled. One key informant, whose foundation made millions of dollars in unplanned grants, noted that the foundation’s programmatic commitments “immediately were under threat, first from the rhetoric and then from the executive orders. There was a sense of urgency” (Informant A). Another funder, which started giving grants outside its core programs, stated: “We’re normally a foundation that is ‘show, not tell.’ But this space needed as many leaders as possible.



So we spoke out. It's important, for our grantees, for us to provide a leadership role. And it was important to our staff, to reinforce the values that they hold" (Informant I). Funders that responded immediately did so by strategically mobilizing resources, whether by making available "rapid response" or "emergency" funds for grantees under threat (Informant A, Informant J); by moving extra board-approved funds into discretionary accounts that staff members could draw upon as needed without awaiting board approval (Informant D); by increasing commitments to existing program areas (Informant A, Informant C); and/or by exploring or launching new lines of grantmaking (Informant F, Informant I). In some cases, these funders focused on progressive issues, such as reproductive rights and immigrant protection. In other cases, funders focused on democratic norms and institutions broadly construed—including shoring up the courts, congressional oversight, and accountability journalism; resisting efforts to restrict or suppress voting; and combatting political misinformation and hate speech. Beyond a few early movers, donors appeared to be grappling with the question of what they might feasibly do given legal limits on the political uses of philanthropic dollars. It is important to note here that, except in highly regulated, special circumstances, foundations cannot give to the types of organizations that do the most political and legislative advocacy—groups organized under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code. Likewise, foundations are legally prohibited from funding candidates, parties, or issue-oriented political committees. Thus, legal constraints limit the contours of grantmakers' resistance funding.

Perhaps in part because of these limitations, many donors hesitated to jump into the fray. Instead, they scanned the landscape for information on what peer donors were doing and sought guidance and convenings by philanthropic support organizations (Informant E, Informant G, Informant H). Some foundations hesitated to directly address perceived threats for reasons that are familiar to philanthropy scholars: norms of spotlighting grantees rather than their funders (Informant A, Informant I); organizational cultures and boards that discourage risk taking (Informant E); and concerns about violating laws surrounding advocacy and political activity generally (Informant A; Informant J; see also Berry and Arons 2003). After proudly describing the progressive orientation of its programs to help immigrants, one foundation executive then acknowledged that they weren't working with other organizations to fight the administration on the issue because the foundation board was "more on the conservative side, shying away from engaging in public policy" (Informant K). Other funders noted that foundations have a strategic advantage in taking the long view, which means staying the course with existing grant commitments. One foundation leader stated: "Foundations...overestimate their indirect influence on political debate in the here and now. And they underestimate how, if they take the long view, they can shape public debate and the conditions that inform politics" (Informant F). These funders illuminate the limits on conceiving of foundations as interest groups.

Even foundations that arguably looked more like interest groups than mere patrons were forced to confront the limitations on the political power of private philanthropy. An informant who has a panoramic view of the foundation community summarized the reaction as follows: "People are struggling: Where can we have influence? Can foundations stop a President hell bent on defying checks and balances in our constitutional democracy?" (Informant H). Foundations' limited



influence is rooted in structural factors. Unlike interest groups, foundations face legal limitations on their political activities and lack voting constituencies. One informant put it as follows: “The political world doesn’t know what to make of foundations. They don’t care what a foundation president has to say. That’s different from a wealthy individual who makes political contributions” (Informant B). Echoed another: “Everybody is wrestling with voice—when to use it and how. And most are overestimating whether anyone is listening anyway” (Informant H). Unlike interest groups, philanthropies may feel that their legitimacy rests on their operating “above politics.” Taking a side—for example, by associating publicly with resistance to a particular administration—could undermine their reputation and risk other work. As one informant noted, “There are still [a large number of] voters in this state who voted for Trump. We have to balance our personal beliefs with what is best for the foundation” (Informant C).

The promise and limits of understanding patrons as interest groups

We started by asking whether philanthropic donors operate as interest groups. To answer this question we said we would look across four dimensions. Do these patrons (a) represent constituencies; (b) undertake long-term political strategizing; (c) demonstrate a reactive capacity to mobilize reasonably quickly to new events; and (d) engage members of policy communities? We used a natural experiment to evaluate the question: an unexpected election result whose aftermath put democratic norms and institutions under strain and many policy commitments under assault. In this environment, patrons faced an inevitable decision: What should we do? Do we support these moves; do we do nothing; or do we resist? In answering these questions, we hypothesized, patrons would show their hands as interest groups—or not—because a response would require impulses toward representation, strategy, reactive mobilization and coalition building.

To our question of representation, we find a mix of responses. If we look systematically at leading foundations, and to some extent at leading individual donors, we find that the response was small and slow. Most donors did not show up, at least in the first few months of the administration. And donors demonstrated little inclination to become more advocacy oriented than they already were. Still, the philanthropic sector is large and diverse, and plenty of bellwether donors pledged new resources and expressed their voice when their issues and constituencies were threatened. Our findings are consistent with two leading views of philanthropy: that it is fundamentally conservative institution unwilling to wade into politically treacherous waters *and* that it can be a means of challenging the state and ensuring democratic pluralism.

We also asked about strategy, noting that conventional interest groups have little choice but to think long term, as policymaking can grind on slowly. Sometimes advocacy organizations can be in a position of being on the defensive for years on end, waiting until a sympathetic administration comes into office. Strategizing often takes place within trade associations or informal alliances as coalitions are typically a prerequisite for gaining the scale necessary to move policy. Strategizing for the



long term might appear to be a real strength of foundations, as they are free of disciplining mechanisms that keep other actors focused on the short term (such as profit requirements for businesses and elections for politicians). Much of what foundation heads, program officers, and boards do is to think critically about the future and how they might best maximize their goals.

Although strategic planning may be funders' forte, our conclusion from a formal review of foundations' directives, their stated priorities, and interview transcripts is that there was limited strategic reorientation. A handful of institutional and individual donors read the election results as a referendum on the state of democratic norms and institutions—including elite institutions such as themselves—and began exploring and announcing new initiatives or devoting greater resources to existing ones. In some cases, these moves reflected long-term strategic thinking about underlying dynamics threatening democratic pluralism. But even these farsighted actors were forced to grapple with limitations on their influence, whether in the form of internal norms or external constraints. Internal norms include the belief that staying the course is a strategic advantage (and a practical requirement, given that foundations often make multiyear commitments to grantees and program areas). Some also have a preference to operate outside the public glare, which includes avoiding political conflict. For large, highly professionalized foundations, internal constraints may have been especially strong: While individual donors speak for themselves, foundation presidents must consider the risk tolerance of their staffs and boards (Fleishman 2007; Frumkin 2006; Kohl-Arenas 2016). Both individual and institutional patrons face external constraints, including complex laws that define the types of political activities and contributions that these donors might pursue. These laws are especially strict for foundations and would keep them from supporting many resistance organizations.

Our third question concerns the reactive capacity of foundations. Interest groups are typically quick to respond to changes in their environment, whether they need to switch to defense or have the opportunity to go on offense. Again, our scorecard yields a mixed grade. A minority of donors mustered new resources to defend imperiled constituencies and to speak out against threats posed by the administration. Individual donors, unconstrained by boards of directors, were more likely to go public with their concerns. But again, the scope of funders' reactive capacity bumped up against limitations. Lacking voting constituencies or other means to directly engage in lawmaking and elections, foundations and to some extent individual donors strained to play the role that conventional interest groups can.

It may be that funders are simply slower than other civil society actors to find their voice and exercise their reactive capacity. In our sample of large, national foundations, we initially found only a modest response to the administration, even amid immediate threats to programmatic goals. However, interviews and outside surveys suggested that more was happening behind the scenes, as funders sought cues from peer institutions and advisors and mulled over their options. Informants suggested that the threats posed and the options available became starker over time as the administration began a series of dramatic moves around immigration, health care, and the environment, while seemingly demeaning democratic norms and institutions. Nevertheless, although scholars have documented the influence of foundations



on particular issues, near the end of year one of the Trump administration, most donors had moved slowly or not at all to defend or reshape existing policy. One foundation leader interviewed summarized this response: “We’re going to continue to do what we’ve been doing” (Informant L).

Finally, we focus on the position of donors within policy communities. Here, we saw evidence that donors sought convening services and less routinized guidance from peers. Occasionally, donors came together to make public statements (notably, in opposition to immigration restrictions) and to organize issue coalitions (notably, in favor of the Paris Agreement on climate change). However, these activities were exceptions, not the rule. Neither the public record nor anonymous interviews turned up evidence that foundations played a leadership role in broader policy communities during the first year of the administration. This tepid response raises questions about foundations’ capacity to serve as conveners or coalition leaders in times when those services may be in greatest demand. Our evidence suggests that funders may serve as patrons of existing or emerging policy communities more than they serve as catalytic leaders.

We conclude that foundations and individual donors share some characteristics with interest groups—enough to make patrons, at least in theory, part of the pressure group community. They belong in this community because, in some cases, they work strategically to mobilize resources and exercise voice on behalf of underrepresented constituencies and broad public interests. However, organizational norms and legal constraints cramp their response, even as their values come under threat. These factors undermine their ability to resist.

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