



1 ORIGINAL ARTICLE

2 **Donors for democracy? Philanthropy**
3 **and the challenges facing America**
4 **in the twenty-first century**

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

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27 Interest groups · American politics

28 Introduction

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

40 In politics, big money typically refers to flows of resources to candidates,
41 party organizations, and political action committees. However, another signifi-
42 cant stream of resources merits attention: money flowing from wealthy donors
43 and foundations to charitable nonprofit and advocacy organizations seeking to
44 influence politics and the policy process. Once seen as passive “patrons” of civil
45 society, these donors increasingly are embracing active roles as “policy entrepre-
46 neurs” (Reckhow 2013) and “drivers” of top-down strategies (Fleishman 2007)
47 to formulate and promote policy ideas, influence public agendas, create and sus-
48 tain think tanks and activist organizations, finance issue-specific Super PACs and
49 candidates, and support novel approaches to implementing policy and measuring
50 its impact. A decade ago, Fleishman (2007) likened big foundations to interest
51 groups. The present moment provides an opportunity to assess whether philan-
52 thropies and their largest donors do act as such by advocating for issues and con-
53 stituencies threatened in the current political environment.

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

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



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

75 This study examines two groups of big donors—grantmaking foundations and
76 individual philanthropists—as they figure out whether and how to join the resistance
77 movement arising out of the 2016 election. These donors have hundreds of billions
78 of dollars at their disposal, powerful networks, and stockpiles of political capital. If
79 deployed well, these vast resources can allow elite donors to have an outsized influ-
80 ence on the direction of the movement and the country. Recent works have raised
81 troubling questions about how big philanthropy fuels civic and political inequality
82 (Callahan 2017; Freeland 2012; Mayer 2016; Vogel 2014). This study looks at the
83 political inequality question from a different angle: Will philanthropy use its finan-
84 cial and moral resources to defend policy approaches, constituencies, and norms
85 threatened by the administration? While scholars have examined patrons in estab-
86 lished democracies (Goss 2006; Hammack 1999; Jenkins and Halcli 1999; Nielsen
87 1989; O’Connor 1999; Teles 2012; Walker 1991; Weaver 1967) and in nations seek-
88 ing to become democracies (Quigley 1997; Herrold 2014), we focus on how patrons
89 operate in a third setting: an established democracy whose liberal, pluralist tradi-
90 tions are under strain. Will these patrons be donors for democracy?

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

106 **Are patrons interest groups?**

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



112 voice (Frumkin 2006); and supporting collective action by underrepresented
113 groups (Berry 1999; Goss 2007; Jenkins and Halcli 1999; O'Connor 1999). To
114 critics, however, patrons constitute “bastions of unaccountable power” (Ravitch
115 2010) who “weaponize philanthropy” to advance personal agendas (Mayer 2016).
116 On this view, “imperious” patrons (Barkan 2011) impose their preferences on the
117 public and its elected representatives (Herbert 2014) and exacerbate civic ine-
118 quality (Callahan 2017). Although the sanguine and critical perspectives differ on
119 the benefits of elite philanthropy, they agree that these actors are politically con-
120 sequential and, in fact, act as interest groups—organizations that try to influence
121 government (Berry and Wilcox 2018, 5).

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

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

133 Representation

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

141 Strategy

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



152 **Reactive capacity**

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

163 **Policy communities**

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

174 A central challenge to research on foundations is that they go out of their way
175 to communicate that they are not politically oriented. They have been deft at sell-
176 ing this narrative. In a sense “politics” dirties the sheen of virtue that defines
177 the image foundations promote. When seen as benevolent institutions, founda-
178 tions escape the public scrutiny that might otherwise facilitate insight into their
179 spending habits. Foundations also want to be viewed as unique institutions, bridg-
180 ing the worlds of commerce and civic affairs. They see themselves as dynamic
181 visionaries, establishing best practices through ambitious but rigorously evalu-
182 ated projects. Above all, they want to catalyze innovation and impact.

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



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

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

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

226 Data and methods

227 The impact of the Trump years upon philanthropy will surely be a subject of future
228 research that will use an array of tools and allow for multiple perspectives on how
229 these early months may have influenced longer-term responses. Here, though, we
230 use the methods available to develop the first chapter of this longer history. The ini-
231 tial phase of the research systematically examined foundation behavior from January
232 20, 2017 until April 2017. The review of individual donors extended until the end
233 of May 2017. A second phase took place in the fall of the same year, and our inter-
234 views were conducted during this later period.



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

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

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

262 To move beyond the public statements of foundations, we conducted interviews
263 with grantmakers to assess strategic thinking about the future path of their philan-
264 thropies in the Trump era. The subjects were CEOs or program managers, individu-
265 als who could tell us authoritatively where the foundations were headed and if there
266 had been any significant change in direction. These were elite interviews, utilizing
267 semistructured questioning that allowed interviewers the latitude to probe and to add
268 questions where advisable. Respondents could speak in depth, which offered detail
269 and context.² The subjects were leaders of either large national foundations or of
270 foundations in the Boston area. Both sets of interviewees were samples of conveni-
271 ence, 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.



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

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

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

3FL01 ³ The process of identifying the 105 “policy plutocrats” was as follows. First, Goss compiled a list of
3FL02 America’s leading philanthropists from three sources: “(1) The Giving Pledge, through which people of
3FL03 wealth publicly self-identify as intending to donate more than half of their wealth during their lifetime
3FL04 (givingpledge.org); The Philanthropy 50, a yearly list compiled by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* of the
3FL05 most generous charitable donors (data are for 2012, 2013, 2014; bequests are excluded); and founda-
3FL06 tions that made the Foundation Center’s Top 100 lists of the largest philanthropies (by assets and by
3FL07 grants) and had the donor(s) at the helm” (Goss 2016, 444). These donors’ philanthropic activities were
3FL08 then examined using public sources, including press accounts, websites, and Form 990 informational tax
3FL09 returns. From these sources, Goss identified a subgroup of policy-oriented donors who met one of these
3FL10 conditions: “(1) identified one of [the five policy process] goals in their Giving Pledge; (2) gave at least
3FL11 one \$100,000 grant from their private foundation, in the most recent reporting year, to further a policy
3FL12 goal; (3) identified public policy interests on their foundation or personal website; (4) contributed any
3FL13 amount to a campaign organization oriented around a specific policy issue (e.g., abortion rights) between
3FL14 2010 and mid-2015; or (5) were publicly identified as having founded a policy-advocacy organization”
3FL15 (Goss 2016, 445). The list of donors is current as of May 2016.



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

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

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

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

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

344 There are conservative grantmakers—the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation,
345 the group of Scaife funds, and the Searle Freedom Trust, for example—but their lim-
346 ited presence in the different samples of foundations studied here may reflect sound
347 reasoning by conservative philanthropists who see more efficient routes for achiev-
348 ing 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 code book, 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

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

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



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

367 Findings

368 For these first 9 months or so of the Trump administration, our central finding is
369 that most elite donors, whether institutional or individual, chose not to exercise their
370 democratic voice in a publicly visible way. By and large, these patrons did not initi-
371 ate grant programs, forge new associational initiatives, or issue statements of sup-
372 port or concern about the administration's agenda. At first glance, we might con-
373 clude that patrons remain private actors in the civil society sphere. Although they
374 clearly have policy and political interests—as investors in causes and constituency
375 groups, as targets of public policy, and as holders of beliefs and values—most did
376 not take the opportunity to publicly advance or defend these interests. Below we
377 present these findings, but we also demonstrate that there were prominent excep-
378 tions. Further, we recognize that some donors may be doing significant grantmak-
379 ing behind the scenes (Callahan 2018). Using these anomalous institutions and indi-
380 viduals, we argue patrons can choose to organize themselves and assume roles that
381 make them the functional equivalent of an interest group.

382 Finding 1: mobilization of resources

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

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

393 Of the 20 largest foundations that were publicly researchable, only one (the Cali-
394 fornia Endowment) said it was open now to receiving applications from nonprof-
395 its wanting to challenge the administration (See Table 2). The silence of the other
396 foundations concerning the Trump administration was notable. It is not only their
397 programs that are threatened by the new administration but also, in many cases, their
398 *raison d'être*. No foundation is more identified with improving health care than is
399 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, but its website contained no word on the
400 administration's repeated attempts to repeal the ACA even months into a concerted
401 attack. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the David and Lucile Pack-
402 ard 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

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

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

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

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."

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

435 **Finding 2: expression of voice**

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

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

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

456 When we looked at policy positions articulated outside the foundation website
457 (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

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

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

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

477 Because not all donors use Twitter to communicate their views, we also con-
478 ducted a systematic sweep of the traditional media for evidence of commentary or
479 activity relating to the new administration. This inquiry turned up 39 donors who
480 had taken a publicly reported position, and again, the modal response was critical
481 ($n=17$, or 16% of all donors), as opposed to supportive ($n=15$, or 14%) or mixed/
482 neutral ($n=7$, or 7%). In the "supportive" category, we see a number of donors who
483 gave money to Trump-aligned organizations but did not speak out about it, which
484 is consistent with the theory that billionaires practice "stealth politics" (Page et al.
485 2015; forthcoming). Looking at Twitter and media accounts together, roughly one-
486 quarter of all individual donors spoke out negatively against Trump ($n=24$, or 23%),
487 while a significant minority was supportive, either quietly or publicly ($n=17$, 16%),
488 or mixed in their views ($n=9$, 9%).

489 Among donors who chose to exercise their civic voice, Trump critics tended to
490 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

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

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

514 **Finding 3: collective action**

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



518 constitute a thin form of collective action. However, patrons may engage in a thicker
519 form of collective action by organizing among themselves to promote their concep-
520 tion of the public good. For example, foundations have long worked through “affin-
521 ity groups” oriented around shared concerns, and these affinity groups have grown
522 in number and become more institutionalized in their function. They are potentially
523 important mechanisms for foundation “resistance” because many are independent
524 public charities with broader latitude to conduct advocacy. What’s more, as umbrella
525 groups they could shield any individual foundation from political controversy. On
526 the individual donor side, we see the proliferation of networks that allow philanthro-
527 pists to coordinate and focus their giving around shared ideological goals (Callahan
528 2017; Mayer 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Vogel 2014). The consoli-
529 dation of foundations and individuals into formalized networks buttresses the argu-
530 ment that patrons are increasingly coming to resemble interest groups.

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

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

554 **Beyond our sample**

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



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

569 This broader sweep of the nonprofit media reveals resistance funding that our
570 data collection did not include. But the more inclusive view nonetheless reinforces
571 the gist of our findings. The philanthropy press found a trend toward the mobili-
572 zation of “rapid response” resources to counter the administration by some founda-
573 tions (Callahan 2018). Such grants are designed to circumvent lengthy proposal-
574 and-review processes and to exist outside of the common 3-year funding cycles.
575 Most conspicuous have been community foundations, such as the San Francisco
576 Foundation, the Brooklyn Community Foundation, and the New York Community
577 Trust, which supported immigrants and people of color (Dorfman et al. 2017); the
578 Ms. Foundation for Women, the Harnisch Foundation, and the Colorado Women’s
579 Foundation, which supported female empowerment (Berry 2017; Marek 2016); and
580 the Security and Rights Collaborative, which supported groups defending Muslim
581 communities (Security and Rights Collaborative 2018). Overall, what our review
582 finds is that those foundations designating additional funding for resisting Trump are
583 relatively small and grants are largely being doled out in modest sums to community
584 nonprofits. We do not doubt the utility of supporting grassroots groups—all politics
585 may not be local, but community activism is vital to changing the national dialogue.
586 Still, in terms of trying to track what is going on nationally, the sums being spent by
587 these groups are modest, and their contribution to capacity building within recipient
588 nonprofits remains open to question. A methodological question also arises: How
589 much of the newly announced money is truly *new* money? Redirecting fixed sums
590 from existing programs that support similar goals may diminish the true value of the
591 grants.

592 There are some large foundations that have jumped in, though we cannot be sure
593 percentage-wise it is much more than what we have found for the period ending in
594 late April 2017. After our initial sweep was completed, the William and Flora Hewl-
595 ett Foundation increased its commitment by \$63 million to some of the program
596 areas threatened by Trump (Dorfman et al. 2017). The Rockefeller Brothers Fund
597 said it was upping its funding by 12% in an effort “to protect and strengthen the
598 vitality of our democracy” (Dorfman et al. 2017). Again, these amounts might be
599 taken with a grain of salt as surely there is some category shifting among program
600 areas within each organization.

601 Finally, we note another study that has tried to systematically measure chang-
602 ing foundation priorities. The Center for Effective Philanthropy surveyed 162 founda-
603 tions with minimum grantmaking of \$5 million annually (Buchanan and Buteau
604 2017). Taken in February and March of 2017, the survey found that 28% of respond-
605 ents said they were modifying or planning to modify programmatic goals in light
606 of the new administration. If we aggregate the responses of leaders to the more



607 immediate responses of the foundations themselves, we come out near the same fig-
608 ure. One journalistic source found some increased movement over the course of the
609 year. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* initially concluded, in early March 2017, that
610 “despite their alarm, few grant makers have taken immediate steps to modify or real-
611 locate their giving” (Preston 2017); however, by mid-August, the *Chronicle* reported
612 that major foundations had pledged “\$700-million and counting” in response to the
613 election (Daniels 2017).

614 A word of caution is in order here. There is almost certainly more going on
615 behind the scenes than is being reported publicly. Our sweeps will not pick up infor-
616 mal coordination among donors on common interests. Nor will this early analysis
617 detect the full range of alterations in foundations’ grantmaking—these changes will
618 become clearer with the release of funders’ Form 990-PF informational tax returns,
619 which typically become public with a 2-year lag. Revelations about individual
620 donors will be more haphazard, often depending on media digging or donors’ will-
621 ingness to be public. As noted, new work by Page et al. (2015, forthcoming) finds
622 that billionaires engage in stealth politics, donating and bundling money to affect
623 policy while tending not to speak publicly about their policy preferences. Hundreds
624 of donors are united in giving consortia, such as the Koch network on the right
625 and the Democracy Alliance on the left, whose activities are increasingly pivotal
626 to party politics yet are conducted in secret (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).
627 Thus, important political work by individual donors remains beyond view. We rec-
628 ognize these limitations, and as the next section details, we have conducted inter-
629 views in part to work around them. However, we maintain that taking a public stance
630 is integral to resistance work; giving privately is important but doing so publicly
631 may magnify the political impact. With a few key exceptions, prominent philanthro-
632 pies and donors opted to battle threats to their values quietly or not at all, at least in
633 the administration’s early months.

634 **Election 2016: what donors “heard”**

635 Our interviews with a convenience sample of foundation leaders help us understand
636 how donors interpreted the election and how they processed the strategic options
637 presented to them. Mirroring philanthropy as a whole, the key informants were pro-
638 gressive in their political orientation and viewed the election, as well as the underly-
639 ing dynamics that it dramatized, with a sense of alarm. Their response to that alarm
640 varied, however. And the variation in responses sheds light on the limits of envision-
641 ing foundations as interest groups.

642 Consistent with the behavior of interest groups, some early donors developed
643 strategies and mobilized their reactive capacity to fight the new administration and
644 its agenda. While this agenda did not initially include proposals that would under-
645 mine foundations directly, progressive donors saw the constituencies and values
646 they represent to be gravely imperiled. One key informant, whose foundation made
647 millions of dollars in unplanned grants, noted that the foundation’s programmatic
648 commitments “immediately were under threat, first from the rhetoric and then from
649 the executive orders. There was a sense of urgency” (Informant A). Another funder,



650 which started giving grants outside its core programs, stated: “We’re normally a
651 foundation that is “show, not tell.” But this space needed as many leaders as possible.
652 So we spoke out. It’s important for our grantees, for us to provide a leadership role.
653 And it was important to our staff, to reinforce the values that they hold”
654 (Informant I). Funders that responded immediately did so by strategically mobilizing
655 resources, whether by making available “rapid response” or “emergency” funds for
656 grantees under threat (Informant A, Informant J); by moving extra board-approved
657 funds into discretionary accounts that staff members could draw upon as needed
658 without awaiting board approval (Informant D); by increasing commitments to existing
659 program areas (Informant A, Informant C); and/or by exploring or launching
660 new lines of grantmaking (Informant F, Informant I). In some cases, these funders
661 focused on progressive issues, such as reproductive rights and immigrant protection.
662 In other cases, funders focused on democratic norms and institutions broadly construed—
663 including shoring up the courts, congressional oversight, and accountability
664 journalism; resisting efforts to restrict or suppress voting; and combatting political
665 misinformation and hate speech. Beyond a few early movers, donors appeared to
666 be grappling with the question of what they might feasibly do given legal limits on
667 the political uses of philanthropic dollars. It is important to note here that, except
668 in highly regulated, special circumstances, foundations cannot give to the types of
669 organizations that do the most political and legislative advocacy—groups organized
670 under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code. Likewise, they are legally prohibited from
671 funding candidates, parties, or issue-oriented political committees. Thus, legal constraints
672 limit the contours of grantmakers’ resistance funding.

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

692 Even foundations that arguably looked more like interest groups than mere
693 patrons were forced to confront the limitations on the political power of private philanthropy.
694 An informant who has a panoramic view of the foundation community
695 summarized the reaction as follows: “People are struggling: Where can we have



696 influence? Can foundations stop a President hell bent on defying checks and bal-
697 ances in our constitutional democracy?” (Informant H). Foundations’ limited influ-
698 ence is rooted in structural factors. Unlike interest groups, foundations face legal
699 limitations on their political activities and lack voting constituencies. One inform-
700 ant put it as follows: “The political world doesn’t know what to make of founda-
701 tions. They don’t care what a foundation president has to say. That’s different from
702 a wealthy individual who makes political contributions” (Informant B). Echoed
703 another: “Everybody is wrestling with voice—when to use it and how. And most are
704 overestimating whether anyone is listening anyway” (Informant H). Unlike interest
705 groups, philanthropies may feel that their legitimacy rests on their operating “above
706 politics.” Taking a side—for example, by associating publicly with resistance to a
707 particular administration—could undermine their reputation and risk other work. As
708 one informant noted, “There are still [a large number of] voters in this state who
709 voted for Trump. We have to balance our personal beliefs with what is best for the
710 foundation” (Informant C).

711 **The promise and limits of understanding patrons as interest groups**

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

724 To our question of representation, we find a mix of responses. If we look sys-
725 tematically at leading foundations, and to some extent at leading individual donors,
726 we find that the response was small and slow. Most donors did not show up, at least
727 in the first few months of the administration. And donors demonstrated little incli-
728 nation to become more advocacy oriented than they already were. Still, the phil-
729 anthropic sector is large and diverse, and plenty of bellwether donors pledged new
730 resources and expressed their voice when their issues and constituencies were threat-
731 ened. Our findings are consistent with two leading views of philanthropy: that it is
732 fundamentally conservative institution unwilling to wade into politically treacherous
733 waters *and* that it can be a means of challenging the state and ensuring democratic
734 pluralism.

735 We also asked about strategy, noting that conventional interest groups have lit-
736 tle choice but to think long term, as policymaking can grind on slowly. Sometimes
737 advocacy organizations can be in a position of being on the defensive for years on
738 end, waiting until a sympathetic administration comes into office. Strategizing often



739 takes place within trade associations or informal alliances as coalitions are typically
740 a prerequisite for gaining the scale necessary to move policy. Strategizing for the
741 long term might appear to be a real strength of foundations, as they are free of disci-
742 plining mechanisms that keep other actors focused on the short term (such as profit
743 requirements for businesses and elections for politicians). Much of what foundation
744 heads, program officers, and boards do is to think critically about the future and how
745 they might best maximize their goals.

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

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

778 It may be that funders are simply slower than other civil society actors to find
779 their voice and exercise their reactive capacity. In our sample of large, national founda-
780 tions, we initially found only a modest response to the administration, even amid
781 immediate threats to programmatic goals. However, interviews and outside surveys
782 suggested that more was happening behind the scenes, as funders sought cues from
783 peer institutions and advisors and muddled through their options. Informants sug-
784 gested that the threats posed and the options available became starker over time as



785 the administration began a series of dramatic moves around immigration, health
786 care, and the environment, while seemingly demeaning democratic norms and insti-
787 tutions. Nevertheless, although scholars have documented the influence of founda-
788 tions on particular issues, near the end of year one of the Trump administration,
789 most donors have moved slowly or not at all to defend or reshape existing policy.
790 One foundation leader interviewed summarized this response: “We’re going to con-
791 tinue to do what we’ve been doing” (Informant L).

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

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

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