Why Political Scientists Should Study Organized Philanthropy

Introduction

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"Philanthropy" has a warm and fuzzy ring to it—bringing to mind the year-end checks that local notables write to community causes and the small monies that millions of ordinary men and women give each week at their place of worship. Perhaps because such gifts do not seem to be the central stuff of politics and public policy, most political scientists—until recently—have left this domain to sociologists, anthropologists, and students of nonprofits based in centers focused on studying philanthropy. In the media and, to a lesser extent, in academia, whenever philanthropy is discussed, it often is touted uncritically as a quintessentially American form of beneficial civic action.

Our discipline's reticence about philanthropy is especially ironic for students of US politics. Not only have Americans always stood out for their voluntary giving to churches and charities; since the early 1900s, the US government also has given enormous tax benefits to wealthy philanthropists—in effect, magnifying the impact of their values and choices in public affairs. Many public efforts undertaken by governments elsewhere occur in the United States, if at all, only at the behest of wealthy people who make donations amplified by taxpayer dollars. Subsidized philanthropy is literally at the heart of American public policy.

Years ago, Jack Walker (1983, 1991) and Jeffery Berry (1999; Berry and Arons 2005), among others, signaled the importance of US foundation patronage to the explosive growth of public-interest advocacy groups and social movements in post–1950s America. However, in this early work, wealthy patrons and foundations were treated mainly as "black box" sources of funding to replace the reliance of early US voluntary associations on dues collected from millions of ordinary members. In political science at least, not much attention was given to the philanthropists, their aims, modes of organization, and policy impact (other than the impact of the advocacy groups to which they donated). However, that is changing now. As this intriguing symposium shows, political scientists are questioning how philanthropic institutions and networks operate; probing their contributions to public agendas, policy battles, and partisan polarization; and asking pointed, normative questions about the influence of tax-subsidized "fat cat" philanthropy on inequality and democracy.

Much of the value added in the new research is from expanding the focus on wealthy individuals one by one. Today, we need only pick up the newspaper to read stories about wealthy philanthropists. The fabulously wealthy have always made for great press: we want to hear about the more or less ethically dubious ways in which they have amassed their fortunes. We also want to learn how some do their "Civic Duty" or "Get Right with God" by using their foundations to promote world health or signing pledges to give away most of their wealth to worthy causes. However, a focus on broad social and political trends—and, above all, a close examination of organizations, networks, and institutions—reveals much more than stories about individual benefactors.

In the current period of sharp accumulations of wealth at the very top, philanthropic giving is booming with many societal reverberations. Currently, even mere multimillionaires set up their own personal or family foundations to take advantage of tax breaks. Small foundations have proliferated, arguably promoting a fragmentation of public life as every donor tries to micromanage this or that worthy program. In addition, philanthropy has become professionalized. Expert consultants have emerged to help wealthy people decide where to distribute their largesse. Additional professions offer tools that supposedly measure the effectiveness of donations and recipient groups, promising to assure wealthy Americans that they are getting an effective "bang" for their charitable "bucks."

The latest fad, described by Jeff Berry in his contribution here, treats charitable grants to nonprofits as if they were "investments" to be tracked, like commercial investments. The effectiveness of this approach is questionable, but Berry

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suggests that it may undercut possibilities for nonprofit groups to engage in policy advocacy and grassroots mobilization. The unintended and indirect political consequences of organized philanthropic practices may be what is most interesting about them—especially for political scientists.

Other political scientists (e.g., West 2014) are examining lists of many individual major donors. However, we also need to examine how donors are organizing their efforts. As Kristin Goss argues, wealthy people are taking an ever-stronger interest in political advocacy and policy causes—and they are doing so not only as scattered individuals or families but also through professionally run foundations and organized consortia of major donors who seek to influence public agendas. Never have so many individuals publicly and privately pledged to donate so much money to public causes—and never have they had as much organizational capacity for doing so.

The most provocative symposium contributions direct our attention to the macroscopic, system-level implications of evolving political philanthropy. As Reckhow shows, in policy arenas such as school reform, there has been bipartisan convergence among wealthy donors around certain policies—in this instance, promoting testing and teaching-quality assessment as well as charter schools. In the short term, this bipartisan donor consensus makes the adoption of favored policies almost unstoppable. However, donor-implanted reforms may not have staying power, Reckhow argues, if they lack buy-in from communities, local politicians, and parents. Her research suggests that the lack of such support has undermined teacher-evaluation programs, for example—even as a different type of buy-in, from commercial companies, has buoyed donor-promoted efforts to increase charter schools.

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In the growing arenas of political philanthropy, the unabashed promotion of ideological and partisan agendas often is the order of the day for donor groups. Politically engaged billionaires and millionaires are sharing information and strategies through formally organized consortia composed of hundreds of donors. On the Left, the Democracy Alliance channels tens of millions each year to many liberal advocacy groups. On the Right, the "Koch seminars" led by Charles and David Koch convene wealthy conservatives twice a year to discuss strategies for change. They raise and direct hundreds of millions annually to an interrelated array of educational, policy-advocacy, electoral, and constituency-building efforts. Overall, the Koch political network rivals and buffets the Republican Party itself, encouraging asymmetric partisan polarization and public policies that favor the super-wealthy (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Beyond the broadest collective plutocratic efforts, we also see billionaires who assemble sets of organizations to pursue policy changes in specific areas in which elected officials have been slow to act (Rutenberg 2014). Tom Steyer's NextGen Climate operation and Michael Bloomberg's campaign for gun reform are good examples. Through advocacy organizations and private foundations, these billionaire "issue entrepreneurs" and others like them engage in every stage of the policy process: formulating and amplifying ideas, creating policy networks with common goals, and pushing coordinated reform agendas. They are not only scattering big checks around to institutions or advocacy groups controlled by others. They are "more than patrons," as Sarah Reckhow notes in her contribution here, drawing on research also developed in her recent book (2013) analyzing the goals and impact of educational-reform philanthropy.

Criminal-justice reform also enjoys a modicum of bipartisan "fat cat" support recently, but many policy realms divide wealthy donors into liberal versus conservative camps (Teles, Hurlbut, and Schmitt 2014). On issues such as taxes, climate change, health reform, and the role of government generally, politically active, wealthy philanthropists are fueling partisan polarization and, in key instances, influencing policy agendas toward the ultra-free-market Right (for case studies, see Skocpol 2013 and Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

In theoretically fascinating ways, the contribution by Steven Teles draws on James Q. Wilson's (1995) classic work about political organizations to highlight the routines that foundations use to establish legitimacy and monitor grantees. Organizational routines matter, especially when they are used to disburse funding in enormous amounts to advocacy organizations that would otherwise fold without the grants. The routines that foundations follow will permeate the goals and routines of grantees—even if the net result is to cause most groups to neglect their substantive missions and focus instead on the short term, as they scramble to apply for their next foundation grants. As Teles suggests, foundation practices promoting short-term, fragmented public efforts may exert substantial influence on liberal groups in US civic life. If so, the net result may be to bias overall partisan competition and policy debates toward the Right. Because this very well may have happened without foundations or individual donors intending such effects, Teles's work underlines the importance of looking at the "big picture" and overall organizational dynamics—not only crediting what individual philanthropists say they want to accomplish.

It is obvious that more empirical work is needed to explore macroscopic trends and trace the overall impact of foundation routines and donor practices in various policy realms.

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One such study is included in this symposium: Alex Hertel-Fernandez's examination of the role of Right and Left donors in supporting—or frustrating—advocates' efforts to build cross-state policy networks in the United States since the 1970s. This study seems to fit the Teles framework; Hertel-Fernandez shows that conservative foundations and wealthy donors have been patient in giving sustained support to right-wing think tanks, whereas liberal donors and foundations have followed a stop-start pattern, leading to many failed efforts to build an equally powerful network of think tanks spanning the states (see also Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol 2016).

current developments as if they were extensions of relatively bipartisan policy experimentation as it happened under foundation guidance decades ago. There was a time when bipartisan US foundations encouraged experimentation in ideas and the search for policy solutions to problems the majority wanted to solve. Those days are gone, in our era of widening economic inequalities, partisan polarization, and fierce political efforts to undermine any semblance of public problem solving. In my view, many of the empirical contributions to this symposium raise searing questions about the normative arguments that Reich makes in support of a strong role for private foundations in contemporary American democracy.

In summary, this symposium opens a rich new agenda for empirical political science, challenging students of US politics in particular to bring the "big picture" of organized philanthropy into sharper focus.

In summary, this symposium opens a rich new agenda for empirical political science, challenging students of US politics in particular to bring the "big picture" of organized philanthropy into sharper focus. Studies of rising inequality, declining democratic accountability, and asymmetric partisan polarization are at the forefront in cutting-edge political science. However, none of these transformations can be fully understood without bringing organized philanthropy into the analysis.

Normative political theorists also have much to gain from a more sophisticated focus on philanthropy and its effects. The proper role of foundations in a democracy is ripe for ethical exploration, as Rob Reich brilliantly describes in his contribution here. Modern foundations are, jointly, creatures of unequal wealth and public-policy choices about taxation and rules of organizational accountability. In the industrial era, the United States has given more leeway than any other modern democracy to private foundations and other nonprofit forms created and used by wealthy citizens. Can this be justified? Reich explores the arguments, both pragmatic and moral.

Critics argue that privileging private philanthropy does little to reduce economic inequality—and actually may exacerbate it—because most private foundations and charities do not help the poor. Moreover, giving so much authority over vital civic resources to wealthy donors undermines democratic governance in many ways. Still, as Reich points out, a case can be made that wealthy private philanthropy encourages innovation and experimentation—thereby furthering pluralistic creativity in American democracy. (This argument resembles the classic argument in US federalism for states as "laboratories of democracy.")

Personally, I am not persuaded by Reich's case because I think he poses the issues through a romantic lens, viewing

However, this is simply how I read the symposium. Others can and should read it for themselves and come to different conclusions. Healthy research fields thrive from discussion and arguments. What all of us in political science can surely agree to, however, is that the time has come for much more robust research on the political roots and results of organized private philanthropy. The contributors to this vibrant symposium show the way forward. ■

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