

The Politics of Giving

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So you've started your foundation in order to further causes you hold dear. But how will you go about your work? Sure, you can support organizations that provide direct services to people, but perhaps your money might be better spent influencing public opinion or government policies related to your political beliefs. While your foundation can't legally lobby the government or fund your grantees' lobbying efforts, it can support advocacy and policy organizations. Many foundations dole out grants to public-advocacy groups in order to influence public opinion and policy on a host of hot-button issues: abortion, welfare reform, gay marriage, gun control. Whatever your political ideologies, there are think-tanks, media, and religious, academic, legal, and social organizations that share your beliefs and will gladly accept your money to advance your principles.

If you lean to the right politically, you have many more options. To cite some of the best-known organizations, the Hoover Institution, Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Heritage Foundation (which receives more than one-fifth of its income from foundations) all would gladly accept your donations. Indeed, 46 percent of all grants made by conservative family foundations between 1999 and 2007 went toward influencing policy, according to the National Committee for **Responsive Philanthropy**, a nonprofit research and advocacy group.

If you're on the left, you'll have more difficulty. Not only are there fewer liberal think-tanks—People for the American Way, the Center for American Progress, and the centrist Brookings Institution are a few—they will spend your money differently than their conservative

counterparts. Think-tanks that tilt right will proudly declare their conservatism and use more of your money to promote a right-wing agenda. By contrast, progressive organizations will often shy away from aligning themselves with a political dogma, preferring to appear neutral while spending less of your donation on influencing policy. For example, Heritage spent a fifth of its \$33 million budget on communicating its ideas in 2002 (the last year for which data is available), while Brookings spent just 3 percent of its \$39 million in 2004 on the same budget line. Progressive and mainstream think-tanks tend to view themselves as homes for unbiased research conducted by disinterested experts. Taking a strong ideological stance, they figure, will potentially decrease their sources of funding—unlike conservative policy organizations, which have strong ties to the foundations that fund them precisely because of their shared beliefs.

Of course, you'll be able to insist on having some say in how your money will be spent. When giving to an organization, you have the option of funding its general operating costs or donating to a specific project. Obviously, the recipients would prefer the former, and many foundations recognize the benefits of general giving. "It's very hard on nonprofits to be given only project support," says Scott Walter, vice president for publications and research at the Philanthropy Roundtable, a national association of conservative donors. "It means that all the overhead costs get slighted: salaries, rent, bills, etc. Desperate nonprofits wind up seeking cash with that attitude: Oh, well, if we can apply for a grant for a project the foundation would be interested in, then we can kind of bend ourselves into doing that." Then, claims Walter, "The project lasts for two or three years and there's little to show for it in terms of lives changed or public-policy changes."

And those general grants, even small ones, can make a sizable difference. "In the case of small local grassroots nonprofits," adds National Committee for **Responsive Philanthropy** spokesperson Naomi Tacuyan, "a core operating grant might mean the difference between being open or having to close for a day or even permanently." In the end, Walter recommends that you simply fund reputable organizations that share your general principles and not dictate to them how to spend their money. If you can bear to let others make those decisions, that is.