

Time for Environmental Funders to Stop Neglecting the Grassroots

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Money makes the grassroots grow.

Particularly since the failure of the climate bill, the strategies and tactics of the environmental movement have come in for a great deal of criticism. But there has been curiously little discussion of a set of players that have more influence than anyone over those strategies: the philanthropic organizations that *fund* the environmental movement.

It's not surprising: Everyone can see environmental NGOs and assess their work. But environmental funders largely operate outside public view, with very little transparency and almost no accountability. I doubt most people, even dedicated greens, could name two or three big funders, much less assess their work.

So how exactly are environmental philanthropists shaping strategy?

There is a criticism of funders on the left that is so old and familiar as to have become cliché. It goes like this: The right's funders have spent the last 30 years building a bottom-up movement. The wealthy conservatives who give money view the heads of movement institutions as trusted peers, so they are content to give without strings attached — their money is “patient.” The right now has institutions and infrastructure that recruit young people, pay them enough to live on, mentor and train them, and send them out into the courts, local politics, and think tanks.

The left's funders, on the other hand, have pursued high-profile national legislative wins. Their money is impatient and results-based. Institutions receiving the money are treated like untrustworthy employees, forced to submit endless progress reports and beg anew for money every year or two. The result is short-term thinking and number-pumping. Young people are treated like chattel, given unpaid internships and asked to accept poverty. Grassroots organizing and local politics are neglected in favor of D.C.-focused lobbying meant to influence

elites.

When it comes to environmental philanthropy, this familiar critique is, at least in broad outlines, correct. What's more, environmental funding tends to be extremely siloed; there's little overlap with broader issues of social and economic justice. Basically, a few big D.C.-based green groups get the bulk of the money, to be spent effecting federal legislation and policy, while smaller community-organizing groups go hungry.

A [new report](#) from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy puts some numbers behind these concerns. It finds that "in 2009, environmental organizations with budgets of more than \$5 million received half of all contributions" in environmental philanthropy, though they represent "only 2 percent of the nearly 29,000 environment and climate public charities in the country." The available green money is highly concentrated on a top-down strategy.

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