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American Philanthropy in the Age of Political Polarization: Conservative Megadonors and Foundations and Their Role in Spreading Climate Skepticism

Natalie Rauscher 

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Abstract Wealthy citizens have influenced public debates and the political process in the United States in many ways, for example through donations or campaign finance. Philanthropy is viewed increasingly as another vehicle of more indirect elite influence. Although institutionally designed to stay above the partisan fray, philanthropy has increasingly been politicized over the last decades against the backdrop of growing partisan polarization. The conservative side in particular has consolidated influence through conservative foundations, think tanks, and new tools of giving such as donor-advised funds. Climate change is one issue in which conservatives have pushed skeptical views and disinformation over the last decades. Conservative actors backed by philanthropic activity have shaped public discourse according to climate-skeptical views and have worked to block political action on climate change while also forming global networks and practices across the Atlantic. While trying to retain the image of academic research and political neutrality, right-wing European think tanks are spreading climate change disinformation, often with connections to their American counterparts and with the support of American conservative donors and foundations. Overall, this paper argues that parts of the philanthropic sector in the United States have abandoned early notions of public charity in order to pursue considerable societal and political goals under the guise of philanthropic activity that provides tax benefits and the image of political neutrality. This paper builds on research that shows how much the interests of the wealthy are reflected in political decision-making in the United States (Bartels 2008; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Gilens and Page 2014), dark money debates in U.S. politics (Mayer 2017; Oklobdzija 2019), and discussions around the role of philanthropic foundations in a democratic society (Reich 2013, 2018).

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Philanthropie und politische Polarisierung in den USA: konservative Philanthropie und die internationalen Verbindungen der Klimaskeptiker

Zusammenfassung Wohlhabende Amerikaner beeinflussen den öffentlichen Diskurs und den politischen Prozess in den USA in vielerlei Hinsicht, zum Beispiel durch Wahlkampfspenden. Philanthropie wird aber zunehmend als eine weitere Methode betrachtet, wie amerikanische Eliten ihren Einfluss in der Öffentlichkeit geltend machen. Institutionell gesehen müssen philanthropische Organisationen politisch neutral bleiben. Doch im Zuge der allgemeinen Entwicklung hin zu einer politisch polarisierten Gesellschaft in den USA, hat sich auch der philanthropische Sektor gewandelt. Vor allem die konservative Seite hat es geschafft, Einflussphären und politische Themen zu identifizieren, die sie auf die politische Agenda und in den öffentlichen Diskurs einbringt. Dies wird etwa durch enorme Spenden von konservativen Stiftungen an Think Tanks oder an sogenannte „donor-advised funds“ finanziert. Diese Organisationen arbeiten daran, öffentliche und politische Debatten dahingehend zu formen, dass die Interessen ihrer konservativen Geldgeber repräsentiert werden und ein langfristiger Wandel im öffentlichen Diskurs und in bestimmten Politikfeldern erreicht wird. Der Klimawandel ist ein Thema, bei dem sich zeigt, wie konservative Akteure seit Jahrzehnten aktiv Falschinformationen streuen. Konservative Akteure, die in vielen Fällen durch konservative Stiftungen gestützt werden, haben klimaskeptische Ideen in die öffentliche Debatte eingebracht und versucht klimapolitische Gesetzesvorhaben zu stoppen. Gleichzeitig haben diese Akteure globale Netzwerke gegründet, die klimaskeptische Diskurse über den Atlantik hinweg verbreiten. Europäische klimaskeptische Akteure haben diese Themen aufgenommen und versuchen, diese auch in die europäische Debatte zum Klimawandel einzubringen. Hierzu hat sich ein Netzwerk von europäischen klimaskeptischen Think Tanks und Gruppen gebildet, die Fehlinformation zum Klimawandel verbreiten und gleichzeitig versuchen, sich ein akademisches und politisch neutrales Image nach amerikanischem Vorbild zu geben. Eine Vielzahl dieser europäischen Organisationen hat direkte Verbindungen zu amerikanischen Think Tanks, und oft werden diese von konservativen Spendern und Stiftungen unterstützt. Dieses Papier zeigt, dass Teile des philanthropischen Sektors in den USA frühere Vorstellungen von „public charity“ hinter sich gelassen haben, um die oft beachtlichen politischen Ziele einiger reicher Individuen zu verfolgen. Gleichzeitig erhalten sich diese Akteure den Status und das Image einer philanthropischen Organisation, der Steuervorteile bringt und politische Objektivität vermittelt. In diesem Kontext baut das Papier auf Forschung auf, die sich mit dem Einfluss der wohlhabenden Schicht auf den politischen Prozess in den USA beschäftigt hat (Bartels 2008; Page et al. 2013; Gilens and Page 2014) sowie auf Forschung zum Thema „dark money“ im US Politik-Betrieb (Mayer 2017; Oklobdzija 2019) und der Debatte um die Rolle von Stiftungen und Philanthropie in einer demokratischen Gesellschaft wie den USA (Reich 2013, 2018).

Schlüsselwörter Mega-Philanthropie · Konservative Philanthropie · Stiftungen · Klima-Skeptizismus · Klimadiskurs

1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the first large general-purpose foundations in the early 20th century, organized philanthropy has played a significant role in American society and politics, maybe more so than in any other country in recent history (Zunz 2014; Reich 2018). American philanthropy is vast and multifaceted, and giving is an activity common for nearly all Americans. In fact, 70% of all charitable giving in the United States comes from individual households (Lilly Family School 2022). Yet large-scale philanthropy by extremely wealthy Americans is playing an increasingly prominent role. While the share of all Americans giving to charity is eroding, giving by the wealthy is increasing. Giving by Americans with an income of \$1 million or more tripled between 1993 and 2016 (Rooney 2019). The ability to give enormous donations to specific causes brings about both publicity and an often quite sizeable potential for influence by these donors. Often, they approach giving through organizations such as family foundations but increasingly also through newer organizations such as donor-advised funds (DAFs).¹

The field of philanthropic activity and charitable giving as defined by early philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie in his *Gospel of Wealth* (Carnegie 1889) has undergone a transformation. While philanthropic activity and organizations continue to be defined as explicitly politically neutral, it has become clear that some parts of the philanthropic sector have found ways to use philanthropic giving to further their political agendas. This is both a result as well as a driver of political polarization in the United States in recent decades. Increasingly, philanthropic giving by the superwealthy comes under scrutiny for steering public debates and influencing the political process—apart from direct political financing, which is prohibited for charitable organizations. Yet, under the guise of furthering the public good and advancing educational purposes, donors on the left and right of the political spectrum have found ways to pursue their political ambitions and goals, often through the funding of think tanks² or advocacy groups. This activity is part of an ever-stronger

¹ Donor-advised funds (DAFs) are so-called sponsoring organizations that usually operate under the 501(c)(3) category of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. Donors can open accounts in the fund and contribute. The organization then has legal control over the donation, but donors or the donors' representatives retain advisory privileges over the donations (IRS 2023a). Donors can collect immediate tax deductions after donations to a DAF, but donations must not be immediately distributed, which is why a DAF is a vehicle attractive for giving with a long time horizon. Additionally, DAFs have even fewer rules of transparency than foundations, and many donors use DAFs in order to remain anonymous.

² In the United States, think tanks usually are nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations and are independent from political parties. Some think tanks are affiliated with government agencies or Congress, for-profit entities, or parties, but most are part of the nonprofit sector. They engage in public policy research, analysis, and advice. There are different types of think tanks, including academic (general-purpose) research-oriented entities, contract research think tanks, advocacy and policy enterprise think tanks, and hybrid forms of these three. Although think tanks are not usually affiliated directly with political parties, they can be categorized according to their political leaning—conservative, center right, centrist, libertarian, center left, or progressive (McGann 2005).

polarization of the political system that has occurred in recent years (PEW Research Center 2014; Teles et al. 2014; Benkler et al. 2018; Abramowitz and McCoy 2019), which is already very responsive to elite interests (Bartels 2008; Gilens and Page 2014). These new patterns of political engagement need to be considered and studied more thoroughly in the context of the current critical state of the social, political, and constitutional order in the United States (see the introduction to this special issue). In many cases, this conduct seems to stretch the definition of advancing the public good and charitable purposes for which philanthropy initially stood to an almost unrecognizable degree, and it renders philanthropic activity as one more element in the polarization process that has expanded to almost all sectors of American society today. Against this background, this paper argues that some philanthropic organizations have abandoned their charitable purpose in a democratic society and are de facto an extension of the political and societal ambitions of wealthy donors while retaining the valuable tax-free status and the image of a disinterested, politically neutral entity. This does not only lead to an extension of the influence of wealthy individuals on American society and the political process but also inhibits a transparent public and political debate about crucial topics because certain actors are actively obscuring their operations in shaping these debates.

In this regard, conservative donors and organizations seem to have been especially successful in consolidating their influence in the “marketplace of ideas” (Rich 2005). This is of interest not only in the U.S. context: We see growing activity of conservative donors and organizations across the Atlantic. Indeed, American donors are already active in Europe, trying to influence political discourse (Evans et al. 2019; Fitzgerald and Provost 2019). Climate change has developed as a key area of such activities for conservative donors and foundations, and they are building international cooperation on the issue with a growing network of American and European think tanks and other organizations pushing climate-skeptical views (Dunlap and Jacques 2013; Almiron et al. 2020; Brulle 2021).

This paper addresses the role of (conservative) philanthropy and donors in recent decades as follows: In the first part of this paper, key definitions of American philanthropy and charity are introduced along with their relation to contemporary philanthropy in the age of political polarization. In the next step, the paper turns to conservative donors and foundations in the United States specifically and their efforts to influence public discourse and the political process. By connecting these processes to the field of climate skepticism in the United States, this paper shows that conservative donors and organizations have been trying to steer the debate on climate change in the United States but have also expanded networks and cooperation across borders to open up avenues of international influence.

Philanthropy, once seen as a nonpolitical activity and charitable endeavor, is increasingly part of efforts by wealthy donors and their organizations to further push their political and societal ambitions. This paper traces how notions and organizational vehicles of parts of the philanthropic sector have changed during the time of increasing polarization and how donors and their organizations have themselves contributed to a more polarized environment. Thus, this paper will contribute to the growing literature around philanthropic study in the field of political science that focuses on the role of wealthy donors and foundations in shaping political and public

debates apart from direct action, with a focus on conservative wealthy individuals and their organizations and a special focus on climate change skepticism.

2 Ideas of Charity and Philanthropy in the United States

Charity and philanthropy have played an important role in the history of the United States in complementing the state or providing expertise to help government officials think differently and solve problems, for instance in the areas of social welfare, education, and research (for a historical overview, see Anheier and Hammack 2010, pp. 14–27; Zunz 2014; Weir and Schirmer 2018; Thunert 2021, p. 68). Although large-scale philanthropy was initially considered a burden for the American democratic system and was met with enormous skepticism among political stakeholders (Reich 2018, p. 5), today, philanthropic activity is supported heavily by the tax code (Reich 2018, p. 8). Charitable purposes in a legal sense are defined as activities that include

“relief of the poor, the distressed, or the underprivileged; advancement of religion; advancement of education or science; erecting or maintaining public buildings, monuments, or works; lessening the burdens of government; lessening neighborhood tensions; eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending human and civil rights secured by law; and combating community deterioration and juvenile delinquency” (IRS 2023b).

This definition offers organizations tax-exempt status under the 501(c)(3) code of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which means they do not pay federal income tax, and donations to these organizations are tax deductible (Chance 2016). Such 501(c)(3) organizations also need to abstain from being “action organizations” that attempt to influence legislation as a substantial part of their activities, and they may not participate in any campaign activity (IRS 2023c). Private foundations fall under this category, as well as most other related types of organizations such as DAFs. Think tanks, which are often funded by private donors or foundations, also mostly operate under the 501(c)(3) category. People donating to these organizations can thus receive tax deductions.

Although all Americans can deduct taxes for charitable giving, wealthy individuals benefit the most from this arrangement because they itemize their tax returns (Davis 2022). Overall, the American government today foregoes an enormous sum of revenue and so de facto subsidizes charitable giving by reducing the tax burden for donors (Chance 2016). As indicated, this situation mostly favors the wealthy. Both for tax-saving purposes and also for the purpose of pursuing charitable giving as an agenda (either for political clout, moral reasons, or both), charitable giving is thus enormously attractive for wealthy citizens in the United States. Over the last few decades, we can see that the amount of giving by the wealthy as part of overall giving has been on the rise, while giving by “ordinary” Americans is in decline (Rooney 2019). Given the enormous sums wealthy Americans are spending on philanthropy, this has led to discussions around the role of philanthropy and foundations in a democratic society in the United States, as an “institutional oddity in

a democracy” (Reich 2013) that amplifies the voice of the wealthy, who are already overrepresented in the policymaking process (Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013).

Today’s concept of philanthropy has grown out of ideas of charity but has conceptually changed quite a bit. While charity can be conceived as providing immediate relief, philanthropy aims to address the root causes of a social ill (Sulek 2010, p. 34; Reich 2018, p. 19). Both activities, however, are directed at “public betterment” (Goss 2016, p. 442)—or what is interpreted as such by wealthy donors. Until today, the notion has prevailed that “[c]harity had been for the needy; philanthropy was to be for mankind” (Zunz 2014, p. 10). Thus, for the self-understanding of today’s philanthropists, the shift in emphasis on strategic and effective approaches to addressing societal needs or issues is salient (Frumkin 2006; Anheier and Hammack 2010, p. 6; Gabriel 2017). In recent years, this approach has been coined “effective altruism” (Gabriel 2017; Kulish 2022). Philanthropic foundations and their donors are thus actively seeking societal and political impact, maybe even more so than their forbearers from 100 years ago—while remaining outside of any democratically legitimized position.

Yet legally, as indicated before, the IRS defines philanthropic organizations as charitable in the sense that they must focus exclusively on things like relief of the poor, religion, education, science, or lessening of the burden of the government. In this understanding, philanthropic organizations should work outside the political sphere but are allowed to work alongside the government. In recent decades, however, it seems that many philanthropic actors have begun to challenge government stances more openly. Often, the charitable purpose of “education” has been used to push different ideas on the political spectrum and advance alternatives to government policy. There has always been a fine line between actual educational purpose and providing “laboratories” for public policy³ on the one hand and actively pushing partisan stances on the other. As will be discussed below, some parts of the philanthropic sector have moved more intensively toward political advocacy in recent decades.

Overall, philanthropy has benefited from the broad interpretation of the First Amendment in the United States, claiming that how wealthy individuals spend their money is a form of freedom of expression (Coyné 2013). Philanthropic activity is supposed to enhance democracy by “promoting a pluralism of ideas, solving collective-action problems, and funding innovative models that government might adopt” (Goss 2016, p. 443). Other views argue that philanthropy cannot be considered in the same vein as individual expression of interests in a democratic society that strives for egalitarian representation because, in fact, the public indirectly subsidizes this activity. As said before, the state forgoes enormous tax revenue from donors and foundations that would otherwise land in the public purse. As Robert Reich argues, “respect for the liberty of individuals to give away money or property that is legitimately theirs is one thing, subsidizing its exercise is another” (Reich 2018, p. 21). It

³ Compare, for example, Alice O’Connor’s paper on the Gray Areas Program by the Ford Foundation in the mid-1950s, from which elements were eventually adapted into the War on Poverty. This is an example of how foundations have supported experiments on social reform in an effort to work *with* the government on social issues (O’Connor 1996).

is therefore of enormous public interest what exactly wealthy individuals are doing with their enormous amounts of money. Although philanthropic giving and foundations have faced only a minimum of scrutiny for a long time, philanthropic giving seems to have become even more opaque today with the help of new giving vehicles such as DAFs, as will be discussed below.

Philanthropy critics have argued that wealthy donors and their activities are essentially antidemocratic, an elite pastime reinforcing inequality (Giridharadas 2018; Reich 2018), and are “channeling activism into organizations unlikely to change existing power structures” (Goss 2016). Overall, these criticisms argue in the same vein as other researchers who have shown that in the United States today, elite influence in the political process is overrepresented and that the interests of the wealthy count disproportionately in political decision-making compared to other, middle-class interests (Bartels 2008; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Gilens and Page 2014; Saunders-Hastings 2018, p. 149). Philanthropy can be seen as another form of elite influence in this regard. Emma Saunders-Hastings calls it the “exercise of plutocratic power” (Saunders-Hastings 2018, p. 150), and Kristin Goss refers to wealthy donors as “philanthropic plutocrats” (Goss 2016). Accountability and transparency should be the norm for organizations in a democratic society that wield as much public power as foundations. Yet this is not the case for philanthropic foundations, as they face neither electoral nor marketplace accountability (Reich 2013). Today, almost any organization can be set up as a nonprofit entity as long as no profits are distributed to the owners. Thus, the “public charity” idea that philanthropy was built upon does not really set limits on activities of philanthropic foundations and donors today (Reich 2013). Overall, many benefits that philanthropic foundations enjoy today warrant some scrutiny in the context of a liberal democratic order, including low accountability and transparency, generous tax treatment, and the protection of the donor’s intent (possibly into perpetuity), as well as some forms of intergenerational transfer of wealth under the guise of a foundation (Reich 2018, pp. 22–23).

While direct influence on the political process by the wealthy such as campaign contributions has received a great deal of attention, philanthropic activity has not to the same extent. This represents a research desideratum, not least because philanthropic activity can also be considered a “complementary set of strategies for using wealth to bring about outcomes” (Saunders-Hastings 2018, p. 150) that wealthy people value. In fact, there are philanthropic network organizations such as the Philanthropy Roundtable (a conservative-leaning organization) that advise their members directly in ways of political agenda setting—for example, in their publication *A Wise Giver’s Guide to Influencing Public Policy* (Miller and Zinsmeister 2015). Donors may thus see “political influence and philanthropic spending continuously” (Saunders-Hastings 2018, p. 150), although this is at odds with what philanthropic activity was made out to be—namely, to remain above political and partisan sides. Yet many wealthy donors today pursue specific and considerable ambitions. They can do so because they have the material means, have a privileged role in American society, are free from market or electoral constraints, possess enough political capital, and can use an array of giving vehicles that hide their activity from public scrutiny (Berry and Goss 2018, p. 234; Reich 2013, 2018). Feeling that the government has failed to act in a lot of instances, “many of America’s millionaires and billionaires are

stepping into the void with ambitious plans to ameliorate public problems” (Goss 2016, p. 442). The implication in turn is that these actors—rather than democratic representatives and processes—can effectively define “public problems”⁴ and bring about social change (Giridharadas 2018).

As indicated, large-scale societal activity by philanthropists is not a new phenomenon but has rather been a mainstay of American society since the Gilded Age (Bremner 1982, 1994; McCarthy 2001; Zunz 2014; Callahan 2017). However, in the 21st century we have witnessed a new level of wealth concentration and more or less an acceptance and expectation of wealthy individuals to use their fortunes in order to address important issues: “Compared to their forebears, today’s philanthropic tycoons are distinguished by the scale of their ambitions; by their application of business rhetoric and methods (e.g., venture-capital investment models and impact metrics) to their philanthropy; and by their desire personally to direct the liquidation of their fortunes during their lifetime” (Goss 2016, p. 442).⁵

3 American Philanthropy in the Age of Political Polarization

Although philanthropy itself is meant to remain above “the partisan fray” (Teles, Hurlburt, and Schmitt 2014), it becomes questionable whether individual donors and organizations today are not actively contesting the state and shaping society in various fields to further their own political ambitions and ideology (Callahan 2017, p. 7; Goss 2016). This seems to be especially significant given the enormous size of some megafoundations today (Katz 2013). This can be considered both a driver as well as a result of increased political polarization in the United States. While the time post WWII has been called the “golden age” for the role of expertise (which has often been provided by foundations or by foundation-backed think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the National Bureau of Economic Research) in the United States by many, trust in established sources of expertise and the government began to erode significantly during the 1960s and 1970s (Thunert 2021, p. 63).⁶

⁴ One such public problem being pushed on the political agenda by a centrist-conservative philanthropist, Pete Peterson, is fiscal austerity. He wanted to bring this topic more strongly onto the political agenda and aimed his philanthropic activity toward public policy to pursue this. Peterson founded and funded several organizations, including the Peterson Institute for International Economics and the Peter G. Peterson Foundation. After pledging a billion dollars to his foundation in 2008, one of the goals was to fund his long-standing goal of curbing the budget deficit in the United States by supporting think tanks, projects, and public education on the subject (Callahan 2017, 61f). By 2010 and facilitated by the large deficits produced through the 2008 financial crisis, Tea Party conservatives had adopted the push for large cuts in government spending, most likely also stimulated by Peterson-backed initiatives in this direction (Callahan 2017, p. 62).

⁵ Authors including Rob Reich (2018) and Anand Giridharadas (2018) have weighed this critically, but this is not always the case. Beth Breeze, for example, advocates for a less hypercritical view on (mega)philanthropy in her book *In Defence of Philanthropy* (2021), arguing that although flawed, the philanthropic sector champions crucial causes and interests from global health to education.

⁶ As Thunert argues, other researchers including André Kieserling and Simone Röder claim that it cannot be universally assumed that scientific experts were universally acknowledged in the post-WWII era (Thunert 2021, p. 63).

On the conservative side, distrust increased after the progressive cultural shifts and political achievements of the 1960s and 1970s, which led to a counterreaction by social conservatives who began to see themselves on the “losing side of history” (Norris/Inglehart 2019 in Leypoldt and Berg 2021, p. 19) or as “strangers in their own land” (Hochschild 2016).

Conservative actors thus started to organize this “counterreaction” in multiple ways in order to gain more control over societal developments and the political process. Steven Teles et al. argue that the influence of conservative ideology on the political process was furthered by a shift in where and how citizens and officials sought information and that foundations’ work lost out in this arrangement:

“The authority of scientific, journalistic, and other establishment institutions took crushing blows from left-leaning forces in the 1960s and from right-leaning forces starting in the 1970s. The country lost the mediating power that these institutions had over public discourse, and in particular their ability to certify basic claims of fact. In their place came media outlets that reinforce polarization in order to profit from it. The center of gravity in the think-tank world shifted from the Brookings Institution—which prided itself on being a ‘university without students,’ with deep roots in academia and with friends in Congress from both parties—to the Heritage Foundation, which was most closely affiliated with conservative social movements and the House Republican caucus. Liberals responded by building more assertively partisan organizations of their own, such as the Center for American Progress” (Teles et al. 2014).

The result of this shift was two largely separate camps of partisan information (and media landscapes [Calmes 2015]) that do not have much in common anymore.

This shift also eventually took its toll on the political process. In the past, bipartisanship was a more common pattern in American politics. Yet after the conservative cultural counterreaction starting in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the political party system and cross-party interactions changed substantially, at least since the 1980s and 1990s, toward a realignment, underscored in particular by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” and the coinciding turn of the Republican Party (Pitney et al. 1995; A.I. Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; A. Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). The Republican Party entered into an era of ideological cohesive majority rule, coupled with diminishing bipartisan efforts (Schmitt 2015, p. 550). The Republican Party also “eliminated funding for independent sources of ideas and expertise-entities (often highly reliant on foundation-funded work) that members had used to support cross-partisan policymaking. As a result, members became ever more dependent on ideological sources of information and authority” (Teles et al. 2014). In such a context, certain conservative foundations and the organizations they fund have become highly influential in political circles because they prioritized ideas and advocacy much more than their liberal counterparts (Schmitt 2015, p. 550).

Apart from the examples just illustrated, giving plays a complex role in the context of polarization and has been studied from many angles, of which *philanthropic* giving is certainly one aspect. Many researchers have looked into the relationship between giving and political polarization, for example at the connection between inequality and polarization. Money in politics becomes ever more important, and at

the same time, the policy preferences of the wealthy are differing more and more from those of the median voter (Gilens and Page 2014). Therefore, polarization is driven by the fact that political actors must seek the support of donors as well as voters (Feddersen and Gul 2015; Kellogg Insight 2015). Thus, policy preferences of the wealthy have a polarizing effect on political results (Kellogg Insight 2015). Additionally, many researchers have looked at campaign finance—maybe the most direct form of influence of money on the political process in the United States—and its role in political polarization. Raymond La Raja and Brian Schaffner found, for instance, that wealthy ideological groups and donors dominate financing of political campaigns, which in turn favors uncompromising candidates on key issues (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Barber 2016). On the conservative side, a small group of conservative and Republican elites favoring policies such as low taxes and little regulation have developed a policymaking infrastructure in Washington. But only since the Tea Party energized the right in the United States have they been able to connect with activists across the nation, aided by conservative media and other conservative networks (Williamson et al. 2011). As this paper argues, more subtle forms of influence on the policy process stem from activities of foundations and philanthropic activity, which are aiming to influence the policy process very early on through subject and agenda-setting activities (F. Fischer 1996; McGann 2005). In contrast to the past, in the polarized environment of the United States today, political actors now often seek ideological “ammunition” rather than neutral expertise. Additionally, think tanks providing expertise to policy-makers operate in an environment where the priorities of private philanthropic foundations funding them have shifted away from basic research to “immediate impact,” which think tanks need to respond to (Rich et al. 2011, p. 18).

Prior to the partisan realignment, the philanthropic sector preferred to be disengaged from partisanship, and foundations rather saw themselves as part of the larger civil society: “Their resources, many in the sector have hoped, could fund objective, nonpartisan research that would take the edge off partisan conflicts and pave the way for broadly accepted social progress” (Teles et al. 2014). Yet in an ever more polarized world, it has become clear that the nonprofit sector is not above the partisan fray and in fact is both a driver as well as an “injured party” in the polarization process in the sense that the long-established politically disengaged self-understanding of philanthropic organizations is often no longer the case or is not working anymore. Specific partisan organizations have been founded to provide ideologically tinged resources to policymakers (of both partisan sides), and more “mainstream” organizations of the past seem to be less and less able to bridge ideological lines in the political decision-making process with more independent sources of expertise. The conservative side in particular has pushed a much more ideologically cohesive way of influencing the policy process since the 1970s, and donors and their organizations have actively helped pave the way for this development. Under the pretext of advancing education as a charitable endeavor and while remaining under the guise of charitable entities, conservative donors and foundations have actively pushed conservative interests on the political agenda, for example through funding of conservative and libertarian think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the

Cato Institute (Dunlap and McCright 2015; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016, p. 683; Abelson 2018).

4 Conservative Giving and Philanthropic Foundations in the United States

Generally, many conservative donors are active in the United States today, and although only a handful might be as well-known as the Koch brothers—whose Koch Industries is still the second largest private company by revenue in the United States as of 2021 (Forbes 2022)—there are many that employ a range of activities when donating their fortunes. Additionally, there are umbrella organizations that provide assistance and advice on where or to whom to donate. As mentioned before, the conservative organization Philanthropy Roundtable advises donors to use charitable giving (e.g., founding of a private foundation, public charity, or social welfare organization) as well as a range of other strategies (e.g., supporting political action committees [PACs] and making direct cash donations) in order to influence public policy more generally (Miller and Zinsmeister 2015; Saunders-Hastings 2018, p. 151).

Generally, “dark money” and its influence in politics through campaign donations and specific (mega)donors in the age of political polarization and massive wealth inequality have taken on a significant meaning, especially since the Citizens United Supreme Court case of 2010. Since then, the impact of big money in politics has greatly intensified (Mayer 2017; Chand 2017; Oklobdzija 2019). Often, the debate revolves around so-called super-PACs, which are registered as 501(c)(4) nonprofit organizations. These organizations do not have to disclose donor information and can engage in much larger campaign spending without being directly legally connected to a specific candidate or party (Oklobdzija 2019). These organizations are nonprofit entities, yet donations to them are not tax deductible for donors. Thus, donations to these entities are less attractive for very large and long-term donations and are more relevant for things like election campaigns.

In contrast, philanthropic giving is tax free on both ends: Donors receive a tax deduction, and philanthropic organizations do not pay federal income tax. This status is attractive for several reasons, including tax saving, retention of more control over directions of endowments and donations, and the image of nonpartisanship. Additionally, philanthropic organizations as well as organizations like think tanks often have a much longer time horizon and do not solely focus on short-term influence during an election campaign. For the 501(c)(3) status, organizations are legally required to remain above politics—but is this really the case? Several philanthropic organizations aim to develop strategies to steer public and political debates in a certain direction in order to make a long-term impact. To achieve this, foundations, organizations like DAFs, and networks of wealthy donors are shaping the political process in many ways, for example through bolstering think tanks, advocacy groups, and constituency efforts (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 127), while often outwardly (and legally) retaining their politically neutral status as charitable organizations. Yet what they are aiming to achieve is to reshape politics and influence

public policy agendas (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 128).

On the conservative side, Charles and David Koch have been among the leading individuals connecting conservative donors, building and strengthening conservative organizations, and donating money to libertarian and conservative causes. Besides direct campaign finance, for which the Koch brothers might be most well-known, the Kochs have founded a number of philanthropic entities such as the Koch family foundations (which consists of several separate foundations). In total, the Koch family connects a wide range of units in a vast network of influence, both in the for-profit and the nonprofit sectors (Doreian and Mrvar 2021). For example, the Koch seminars have connected close associates and other conservative donors since 2003 in their quest to push the Republican Party in the direction of libertarian and extreme free-market ideas (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 128). The Koch brothers and their networks have used an array of methods of political and public influence, including corporate lobbying, direct campaign contributions, and “politically tinged non-profit spending” (Mayer 2017, p. xvi). It is likely that their activity has contributed to “rightward-leaning polarization” (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 128) in recent decades. By encouraging members “to support a highly centralized and strategically nimble political operation” (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 128), the Koch seminars built on conservative discontent under the Bush and Obama presidencies and tried to shift federal policy to the right (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 128). These Koch seminars are part of a larger network that the Koch brothers have spun over the last decades, utilizing their enormous fortune to contribute to elections directly and also to push libertarian ideas in the public debate through donations to the Cato Institute, the Charles G. Koch Foundation, and the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. Later on, they poured money into lobbying efforts and political advocacy groups (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 132). After turning away from the Libertarian Party, they turned their influence on the Republican Party. They renewed their efforts to change the party’s direction in earnest after 2003 and during President George W. Bush’s administration with the support of the Koch seminars and the federation Americans for Prosperity (AFP), which organized and lobbied nationally (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 133). Especially after Barack Obama was elected president, conservative politicians, businesspeople, lobbyists, and donors mobilized in order to obstruct the administration’s agenda as much as possible (Mayer 2017, p. 1–2).

By now, the AFP has come to rival the Republican Party in staff and resources (Mayer 2017, Pos 153; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016, p. 687; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 151). As nonparty entities’ resources like those of the Koch network and their right-wing donors grew, party control over resources in the Republican Party shrank in the early 21st century (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 154), which gave organizations like the AFP—and therefore their wealthy backers—enormous potential in steering the direction of conservative politics. Like other donor networks, organizations like the Koch seminars are working toward funding lobbying campaigns or selecting Republican candidates for primaries or general-election campaigns, but they are also interested in tackling a broader range of politically relevant activities such as idea generation and policy development. Here, these

networks certainly share features with other conservative philanthropic foundations such as Olin and Scaife, as these entities encourage long-term investment aiming to reshape the political landscape as a whole. They try to achieve this by investing in an array of external organizations such as universities, think tanks, grassroots groups, and lobbying operations (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 130) and thus inject conservative viewpoints into the public and political debate.

In the view of Andrew Rich, conservatives in the form of loose donor networks as well as conservative foundations have thus been able to impact elected officials and also public sentiment more broadly (Rich 2005). These activities by conservative foundations and policy actors on public and political discourse could also help explain why Republican candidates are increasingly holding more extreme economic positions (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016, p. 682), limited government positions (e.g., health care or the social safety net), and climate-skeptical views (Doreian and Mrvar 2022, p. 307, 2021, p. 150) which have been championed by conservative forces for a long time.

One key element in swaying political discourse and policymaking in the United States to the right, as mentioned before, has been funding of think tanks through conservative foundations. Conservative think tanks seem to have extensively pushed certain ideas into the public eye and potentially onto the political agenda, for example on issues including limited government, deregulation, and privatization—not necessarily only by spending more money but also by employing different and more aggressive strategies (Rich 2005, p. 18). Conservative foundations have focused spending on policy institutes for a long time, unlike their mainstream counterparts. Since the 1970s and the birth of the Heritage Foundation, new conservative and generally ideologically driven think tanks have emerged that operate differently from organizations such as Brookings and the National Bureau of Economic Research (which were also initially backed by foundations): “Ideological, marketing-oriented think tanks modeled after Heritage proliferated, particularly on the right (e.g., the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Progress and Freedom Foundation), although also in the center (e.g., the Progressive Policy Institute) and on the left (e.g., the Economic Policy Institute, the Center for National Policy)” (Rich 2005, p. 20). But most of the think tanks founded in this period were ideologically conservative, and these were backed by a handful of conservative private foundations such as Bradley, Smith Richardson, and Scaife. These conservative think tanks tended to be more broad ranging and multi-issue rather than single issue, so it was easier for these conservative think tanks to redirect resources when necessary. Additionally, many liberal foundations granted support on a specific project basis rather than general organizational support, as the conservative foundations did. Conservative organizations, therefore, have had an advantage when it comes to retaining organization, staff, and function (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016, p. 685; Rich 2005, p. 20; Brulle 2021, p. 4).

Moreover, many “mainline” foundations were keen to only support rigorous research in the think tank world: “For them, think tanks and policy institutes should be homes to the disinterested expert. Concern for neutral, unbiased research is not a preoccupation of the foundations on the right” (Rich 2005, p. 23). Thus, “conservative think tanks have made marketing conservative ideas a priority with the full

knowledge and support of conservative foundations. This is what the conservative funders want them to do, and it is what makes conservative think tanks not only well funded but also influential” (Rich 2005, p. 25).⁷ This again shows that several large philanthropic organizations have not remained above “the partisan fray” in the last few decades but that they actively push specific viewpoints and the political agendas of their donors.

Overall, one can say that while large parts of the philanthropic sector continue to engage in charitable activity, some parts have moved toward activity that can be considered more openly political, all under the legal definition of a philanthropic organization and a broad interpretation of what constitutes “charitable.” This way, philanthropic foundations and the organizations they fund have been able to retain their valuable tax-exempt status as a charitable entity, which provides them with large amounts of funds at their disposal as well as the air of a politically disinterested organization. The government forgoes enormous tax revenue from individuals and organizations, practically subsidizing charitable giving by entities that in reality are only outwardly politically neutral. Whether their activities can still be seen as “charitable” in any sense seems questionable. Although charitable organizations are designed to provide relief or education or to lessen the burden of the government, this has been very broadly interpreted by many organizations in recent decades. Conservative donors and foundations in particular have organized their political ideals into policy institutes (think tanks) and other networks (Brulle 2021, p. 4) and have continued to push their ideas onto the political agenda and into the public and political discourse at large, especially pro-market, limited government positions. One area where the consequences of this are at play is the field of climate change policy. By pushing pro-business/pro-market, antigovernment ideals, stalemate and skepticism could largely be achieved when it comes to effective climate change policy in the United States.

5 Conservative Actors on Climate Skepticism

Compared with other countries, the U.S. population remains among the least concerned about climate change. According to a PEW Research Center survey, less than 60% of Americans see climate change as a major threat, compared with 80%–90% in countries including Greece, South Korea, France, Spain, and Mexico (PEW Research Center 2019). Although climate research across the board confirms the primary role humans have played in global warming over the last decades (Walsh et al. 2014; IPCC 2022), this remains a contested political issue in the United States, if not a veritable cleavage between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans. In a PEW Research Center survey from 2020, the partisan divide on the impact humans have on climate change becomes visible. Overall, 51% of Americans say that humans only contribute somewhat or not much/not at all to climate change, and 49% see humans contributing to climate change “a great deal.” The differences become

⁷ In the meantime, more unapologetically progressive organizations (e.g., the Center for American Progress) have also formed and are backed by liberal foundations (Callahan 2017, p. 88).

even stronger with a view to party affiliation: 78% of Republicans say that humans only contribute somewhat or not at all to climate change, whereas 72% of Democrats see humans as contributing a great deal to climate change. The cleavage becomes even greater between conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. Thus, we see that climate change remains a deeply divisive topic between the two parties (PEW Research Center 2016, 2020). This stark partisan division and denial of manmade climate change among many in the United States today has not emerged out of nowhere, and conservative donors and foundations have done their share to fund climate-skeptical views in the United States as well as worldwide.

After some bipartisan agreements in the field of environmental protection in the early 1970s, consensus between the two parties soon fell apart, and environmentalism has since been strongly opposed by the wider conservative movement (Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 305). In the late 1980s and 1990s, when global warming began to appear on the agenda globally, actors such as the industry-backed Global Climate Coalition and later entities such as the Koch network (with the Koch family having made their fortune from oil, gas, and the chemical industry) began to spread doubt about the significance of climate change more broadly (Dunlap and Jacques 2013, p. 700; Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 300; Quent et al. 2022, pp. 137–136). After some public backlash in the 1980s, when environmental policy was openly opposed in the Reagan administration, conservative activists turned to more subtle ways of shaping the discourse on climate change by “manufacturing uncertainty” (Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 306) around climate science. Since then, climate-skeptical views have been disseminated by an array of actors, seemingly intensifying their efforts whenever international agreement on climate policy seems imminent. This development reached an unprecedented organizational level in the 2000s (Dunlap and Jacques 2013, p. 700; Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 300).

In recent years, conservative donors have not only funded the climate denial movement but they have done so using new giving vehicles that obscure the origins of donations. Thus, large amounts of “dark money” from conservative foundations could flow into the climate denial movement (Brulle 2021). Between 2003 and 2018, conservative foundations and donor trusts gave enormous sums to more than 100 different climate-skeptical organizations and groups. Donations amounted to \$357 million per year in 2003 and \$808 million in 2018. By 2018, the top grant makers included Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund, as well as foundations such as Scaife, Bradley, the Koch family foundations, and the Devos family foundation (Brulle 2021). Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund are essentially DAFs, which do not have to disclose donor information and can thus keep core donors anonymous (Fischer 2013; Brulle 2021, p. 4). This vehicle is unlike a traditional foundation, which has to pay out 5% of its funds every year and needs to publicly disclose a minimum of information on donors and other financial figures to the IRS. By using DAFs, donors can effectively funnel money into causes and do not have to disclose any information about it, while at the same time collecting tax breaks for their donations because DAFs remain charitable entities under the law (D. Fischer 2013; Brulle 2021; IRS 2023a).

Robert Brulle argues that both the funders and the climate-skeptical organizations themselves are “core institutional actors” (Brulle 2021, p. 4) of the conserva-

tive movement more broadly and that the funding strategy of these organizations has been remarkably consistent over the years. The conservative Olin Foundation first established a giving strategy for conservative philanthropies in the early 2000s, which has informed giving by conservative foundations ever since (Brulle 2021, p. 4). As mentioned before, this strategy includes long-term funding and capacity building for organizations that further clear conservative viewpoints, of which climate skepticism remains part.

Generally, discussions around climate science have seemingly only increased in the United States, and no consensus has been reached. In a study on climate skepticism discourse in the United States, Constantine Boussalis and Travis G. Coan ascertained that conservative think tanks are often funded by conservative foundations and that their climate-skeptical views played a significant role (Dunlap and Jacques 2013; Boussalis and Coan 2015). Although conservative think tanks are not the only actors promoting climate-skeptical views, they play a key role in “manufacturing uncertainty” by providing counternarratives to science. Additionally, they have lobbied to obstruct climate policy for decades by offering material support to contrarian scientists, organizing conferences, and communicating their views directly to politicians and the media (Boussalis and Coan 2015, p. 89; Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 308; Brulle 2021).

“Viewed largely as an extension of the conservative movement in the U.S., organized climate denial was born out of the deep pockets of conservative foundations and corporate interest groups committed to promoting free-market principles and rolling back government intervention in all aspects of the economy (...) [A]fter suffering public defeats on environmental issues during the 1980s and early 1990s, conservatives quickly learned that directly challenging key environmental policies was fraught with risks and, as such, ‘shifted to a more subtle form of power characterized by non-decision-making and agenda setting’” (Boussalis and Coan 2015, p. 90).

Judging by the increase in the number of documents produced by climate denial organizations, the misinformation campaign has escalated over time (Boussalis and Coan 2015, p. 97). The strategy has also changed from attacking climate science directly to criticizing or disagreeing with the need for climate policy (Fisher et al. 2013; Boussalis and Coan 2015, p. 98). Think tanks that were engaged in spreading climate denialism and received funding from conservative donors and foundations include the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, the Federalist Society, the State Policy Network, the Hudson Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (Goldenberg and Bengtsson 2015). Additionally, the Heartland Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, the Marshall Institute, and the Cato Institute are among U.S. think tanks and organizations seen as spreading climate-skeptical views that have received money from conservative foundations and donors (Dunlap and Jacques 2013, p. 700; Busch and Judick 2021, p. 5; Brulle 2021; Heartland-Institute 2022).

The often opaque nature of climate denial funding raises serious questions about publicly available data and transparency on who is influencing public discourse and political agendas in what way (D. Fischer 2013; Brulle 2021). Well-funded climate

denial groups misleadingly purport a conflict in climate science, actively obscuring extensive scientific consensus on climate change (Dunlap and Jacques 2013; Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 301; Busch and Judick 2021). This development has only intensified over the years as U.S. donors have increasingly made use of new vehicles like DAFs that can obscure donors. In this context, the issue of climate change has become the model example for the convergence of philanthropic giving—at least legally speaking—and the spread of misinformation (Farrell 2019, p. 1).

There are different signs that the spread of climate-skeptical views that is massively funded by conservative donors and philanthropic organizations has had an impact in the United States and is ongoing. First, as mentioned before, the United States remains a country in which the population does not consider the impact of manmade climate change as significant as citizens of other countries do (PEW Research Center 2019) and in which the issue remains deeply divisive between the two major partisan sides. By now, it is obvious that there is a deep divide between (conservative) Republican voters and all other voters when it comes to views on climate change. Both conservative and moderate Republicans are far from the average voter on prioritizing climate change in their election choices (Leiserowitz et al. 2023, p. 7). According to a study by the PEW Research Center, Republican voters do not see climate change as a national priority for Congress or the president: Only 13% of Republican-leaning voters say it is a high priority to deal with global climate change, whereas 59% of Democratic-leaning voters say it is a high priority (PEW Research Center 2023). This divide between liberal and conservative voters can be traced over several years but seems to have escalated in the most recent past, especially since 2014/2015; Democratic voters have given global warming a much higher priority, while conservative voters have continued to see it as a low priority overall (Leiserowitz et al. 2023, p. 8). Over the years, the dissemination of climate-skeptical views has taken a strong hold in the Republican Party, where calls to terminate or seriously obstruct the Environmental Protection Agency and climate-related policies are frequent (Dunlap and McCright 2015, p. 300; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016, p. 682). Even though not all Republicans deny the existence of climate change, there continue to be efforts by Republican lawmakers to stall and delay climate policy in many ways (Friedman and Weisman 2022). This pattern seems to follow tactics by the climate-skeptical movement described above: Although outright denial is often not the case anymore, there are now efforts to spread uncertainty about the soundness of research, as well as efforts to obstruct climate policy. This has not only led to a stalling of effective climate policy in the United States for many years but has also led to a lack of leadership in climate policy on a global scale. In the 1990s, the U.S. Senate failed to ratify the Kyoto protocol under a Republican majority (McCright and Dunlap 2003). More recently, the United States withdrew from the major international climate agreement, the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, under the presidency of Donald Trump (Daley 2020). Overall, there seems to be a considerable correlation between the conservative movement funding climate-skeptical views on a grand scale and sizable portions of conservative voters picking up on the climate-skeptical discourse in their voting decisions. Additionally, several Republican lawmakers are working on stalling progress on (global) climate policy in many ways.

6 Transatlantic Collaboration on Climate Skepticism

Although climate change is not as controversial in Europe as in the United States, conservative groups are forging a new climate-skeptical international cooperation with the help of conservative American donors. In Europe, some right-wing parties and affiliated organizations are working on spreading doubt about climate change, including the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) party in Germany, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria, the Lega Nord in Italy, the Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the United Kingdom, and the French Rassemblement National. A recent study by the think tank Adelphi, which mapped European right-wing populist parties' stances on climate change, argues that most of these parties oppose climate and energy transition policies in general but that there are some nuances. Out of the 21 right-wing parties surveyed, seven outwardly denied the scientific consensus on climate change and its causes, including the AFD, UKIP, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Danish People's Party, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia, the Sweden Democrats, and FPÖ (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 10).

The AFD and UKIP rank among the most active climate change deniers (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 36). In their party statements, the AFD openly denies that climate change is caused by manmade factors and wants to overturn policies of the so-called *Energiewende* in Germany, the transformation toward renewable energy, especially the field of decarbonization (AFD 2022; Quent, Richter, and Salheiser 2022, pp. 100–101). The UK Independence Party argues that weather patterns have always changed over the course of humankind's history and that manmade climate change is not the reason behind such changes. They also oppose the building of new solar and wind parks on former farm land or offshore (UKIP 2022). Parties such as the Rassemblement National, the Lega Nord, and the Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość are rather inconsistent on the issue of climate change but do not openly reject climate science per se (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 36).⁸

Apart from parliamentary opposition to climate change policy across Europe, several European right-wing parties have initiated a network of climate-skeptical scientists and groups (Busch and Judick 2021). The German climate-skeptical think tank Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie (EIKE), for example, specifically focuses on casting doubt on scientific consensus and assessments of the changing climate, and it regularly attacks scientific findings and institutions. In fact, carbon dioxide emissions by humans are portrayed as harmless and marginal, and climatic changes are presented as natural phenomena (Busch and Judick 2021, p. 12). The think tank also pushes so-called contrarian science and supports networking in this field by organizing its own yearly climate conference where, for example, American and German "experts" come together to network (EIKE 2022). This seems to be inspired by what many American think tanks have been doing over the last decades, namely trying to replicate the legitimacy and prestige connected to academia and

⁸ In contrast to most European right-wing parties, Hungarian Fidesz, the Finns Party, and the Lithuanian Order and Justice Party are actually affirming the scientific consensus on climate change (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 36).

research in order to give their contrarian views more clout (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2005; Quent et al. 2022, pp. 166–167).

Moreover, not only since former President Donald Trump announced rescinding from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2017 has there been a transatlantic connection between European parties and groups and U.S. organizations such as the Heartland Institute and the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow (Fiedler 2019; Quent et al. 2022, p. 167). In a study from 2020, Nuria Almiron and colleagues found that there was a strong flow of information between U.S. and European Union organizations regarding climate skepticism and “contrarian discourses” (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2004). Specifically, Almiron et al. investigated a wide array of material from European climate-skeptical think tanks and compared it to messaging by American contrarian think tanks. They found framing that strongly contested the consensus inside climate science as well as its legitimacy among European climate-skeptical think tanks. The legitimacy of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was questioned, as well as the role of humans as a cause of climate change. Framing that was skeptical of any climate change policies could also be found. Some European contrarian think tanks also disseminate the message that either climate change is not happening at all or that it is actually a positive development (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2012). Overall, counterframes used in the American context casting doubt on climate change from different angles could be found in the climate-skeptical discourse disseminated by European organizations as well (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2014), which suggests a strong flow of information between European and American organizations in this field. European think tanks engaged in climate change denialism seem to take inspiration from the “successful” American model for disseminating climate-skeptical messages and trying to inject them into public discourse.⁹

The authors argue that the combination of the power of the fossil fuel industry and the ability to capture cultural and political opposition against the environmental movement in the United States may have led to an earlier and faster dissemination of climate-skeptical views in North America than in Europe. Yet in the last 25 years the movement has also grown in Europe, not least because of the transatlantic flows of information and connection. Consequently, European think tanks on climate skepticism no longer appear as merely negligible or marginal actors but have grown in tandem with American actors—albeit not with as much success (yet). But as one can see in the American context, think tanks and other advocacy organizations can have an impact in pushing certain ideals into the public and political discourse and have proven influential in the public debate while outwardly retaining some of the air of a (charitable) nonprofit organization interested in academic research and debate. This seems to be the model that European think tanks follow to some extent, for example in their messaging and image-building.

⁹ Apart from the skeptical framing around climate change that has been a common denominator between American and European think tanks, there seems to also be a wide range of even more extreme views on the climate change debate that display clear signs of conspiracy myths and that are spread and connected through social media sites on a worldwide scale. Myths include the idea that climate change is a hoax and a lie invented by sinister “globalists” and politicians. These myths display clear anti-Semitic and extremely right-wing tropes (Quent et al. 2022, pp. 95–96).

Current climate-skeptical organizations in Europe include both older and newer conservative and libertarian institutions such as the Austrian Economics Centre, the Institute Economique Molinari (France), EIKE (Germany), the Instituto Juan de Mariana (Spain), the Liberales Institut (Switzerland), the Centre for Policy Studies (United Kingdom), the Institute of Economic Affairs (United Kingdom), and the Global Warming Policy Foundation (United Kingdom) (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2007; Busch and Judick 2021). The majority of these organizations are connected to U.S. climate-skeptical institutions and have received funding from them (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2008). Most of them are also members of the Atlas Network, a United States-based network of libertarian, pro-free market think tanks (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2009). As mentioned previously, many climate-skeptical talking points and strategies have been exchanged across the Atlantic.

Narratives used by climate skeptics have been established for a long time and have not substantially changed (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2015; Busch and Judick 2021, p. 17). However, the dominant framing by climate-skeptical think tanks of the 1990s, namely the outright denial of any change in the climate, does not seem to be dominant anymore. Instead, the emphasis lies on casting doubt on the credibility of science and its institutions (Busch and Judick 2021, p. 18). Additionally, these organizations are linking themselves to right-wing populist parties across Europe and consider themselves a countermovement (Almiron et al. 2020, p. 2016). Organizations such as EIKE have close ties to political parties of their country, in this case the German AFD, and have been instrumental in developing their skeptical view of climate change (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 84; Quent et al. 2022, p. 168). Additionally, organizations like EIKE also have close ties to American think tank counterparts, such as the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow and the Heartland Institute, according to the lobby-watch site Lobbycontrol. For instance, they regularly exchange German and American speakers for their climate-skeptical conferences (Lobbypedia 2022).

Contemporary climate change denial discourse has developed and prevailed for decades, ever since the issue of global warming became an item on the global political agenda. Climate-skeptical views were considerably financed and pushed by conservative foundations and think tanks in the United States, which were able to inject their views into American public and political discourse on climate change. Increasingly, they are also forging networks internationally. Although “among European right-wing populist parties, climate change is not (yet) as ideologically entrenched and identity-laden as it is in the American context” (Schaller and Carius 2019, p. 38), and climate-skeptical views are less strongly reflected in the public and among political actors in power, the transatlantic ties on climate change denialism suggest that extremely wealthy donors can have an impact on public and political discourses as well as the political process—not only in the United States but also on a cross-country scale. Here, it seems that the European right-wing movement takes the U.S. context as a model, especially think tanks that are closely aligned with certain political or ideological ideals while outwardly trying to retain some neutrality and the air of research institutions. Climate-skeptical actors in Europe try to provide compelling alternative narratives and strategies in order to challenge established facts and the legitimacy of climate science. Often, these organizations

can obscure the true nature of their (transatlantic) funding because money does not only come directly from philanthropic foundations but increasingly flows through organizations such as DAFs that provide anonymity to donors. This means that conservative wealthy individuals in favor of climate-skeptical views are using philanthropic giving vehicles that obscure their activities, which leads to a concerning lack of transparency regarding who is steering and shaping public debates in the United States and internationally.

7 Conclusion

This paper discusses how philanthropic organizations under the 501(c)(3) category are attractive for wealthy Americans in order to wield considerable public power. Although all Americans have traditionally been engaged in charitable giving, giving by the wealthy has increased over the last decades, and today the state forgoes enormous tax revenue in favor of charitable giving, which can be considered a de facto subsidy. Strategic giving aiming at “root causes” of social ills has been pursued by American philanthropists since the time of Andrew Carnegie and the first large-scale foundations. Today, donors and their organizations, such as private foundations and newer giving vehicles like DAFs, are treading a fine line between providing grants to projects and organizations that provide new ideas for reform that can inspire public policy, and engaging in political advocacy disguised as charitable giving. Wealthy individuals’ philanthropic activity is often described as a form of freedom of expression—yet critics see this as a plutocratic endeavor that favors the interest of the wealthy, perpetuates the status quo, and is unlikely to really lead to any social progress or public betterment.

In recent decades, some parts of the philanthropic sector have moved toward a more explicitly partisan agenda, which can be seen as both a result and a driver of political polarization in the United States more broadly. Especially conservative actors have funded explicitly conservative organizations such as think tanks through philanthropic giving (e.g., foundations) in order to establish conservative, libertarian, and downright disinforming viewpoints in public debates long term and to bring them onto political agendas. Today, giving to explicitly partisan topics is often disguised through new giving vehicles such as DAFs that offer tax benefits and the air of a nonprofit entity while providing the possibility to funnel money to a myriad of ideologically tinged causes. This is part of a larger debate around the impact of “dark money” on American political discourse and political decision-making that has increased in recent years, not least since the *Citizens United* decision of 2010. A democratic system should represent citizens equally and be transparent in decision-making processes as well as provide accurate information to allow voters to make informed decisions, which the influence of dark money on the political process and on public discourse calls into question.

Climate change is one of the topics in which the influence of largely anonymous giving is exceptionally noteworthy. The United States stands out with regard to the population’s division on the causes of climate change and the policies that should be adapted in response to it. There seems to be an undeniable correlation between

a decades-long climate-skeptical campaign funded by conservative foundations and think tanks and the divisive stance on the subject of climate change in the public and political realm in the United States. In other fields, this is also visible, e.g., in efforts to challenge election results (see e.g. Julia Simon's paper in this special issue), which puts into view the risk that disinformation poses for key pillars of the liberal democratic system at large.

Overall, one can say that parts of the philanthropic sector have abandoned the traditions associated with the initial "public charity" idea of early philanthropy and have used philanthropic organizations—old and new—as an additional path to pursue societal and political ambitions. What does it mean for (American) democracy if a small group of wealthy people increasingly funds all sorts of political organizations and is thus growing to dominate public discourses? As Hertel-Fernandez et al. argue, "donor organizations that magnify the values of the wealthy by concentrating the financial clout of many like-minded privileged people may undercut democracy even when they do not merely further elite economic interests" (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018, p. 160).

This quote shows that philanthropy in the United States (and its international connections) is increasingly criticized for distorting democratic values and participation. Although philanthropy and giving by the ultrawealthy have played key roles in the United States for over a century, in the context of growing inequality and political polarization in recent decades, the disproportionate means and potential for influence by the wealthy on the policy process and on societal debates in the United States take on a new relevance. Direct giving, for example to political candidates and political campaigns, is one tool that wealthy donors can use in order to shape the political agenda. Philanthropic giving through foundations or increasingly through other nontransparent vehicles such as DAFs facilitates an extension of the influence by the wealthy on the political process and public discourse. This reignites the discussion of what role philanthropy and foundations should play in a democratic system and whether it is in the interest of a society to heavily subsidize these activities in the name of "charity," which in reality can be mainly considered the expression of interests by the wealthy (Reich 2013, 2018).

Strategic giving of enormous sums of money to think tanks and advocacy groups seems to be at odds with the initial outlook of philanthropic donors and organizations to generally engage in "public betterment." Yet the United States has developed into an ever more polarized society, and this is reflected in and reinforced by some parts of the philanthropic sector as well. With rather explicitly political and partisan activities under the cover of philanthropic giving and organizations, the meaning of charitable giving and general improvement of society seems to have been stretched to an almost unrecognizable degree. In particular, the field of climate skepticism illuminates that the causes that corporate and conservative donors are funding often have little to do with any improvement of humankind. Under the guise of "education" as a charitable activity that can be funded by philanthropic foundations or other nonprofit organizations, unscientific disinformation is spread—for example, in the field of climate change. This has very likely contributed to stalling of dearly needed implementation of effective climate policy. The recent push by the Biden administration to introduce new climate policy in the United States has been hailed

by scientists—but the United States remains about a decade behind Europe when it comes to climate change policy (Vaidyanathan 2022). As this paper argues, there is a strong correlation between the continuous spread of climate-skeptical views over the last decades, and the lack of awareness of climate change as well as the failures to effectively address it through policy.

Although more general critique of philanthropy's role in a democratic society has increased in the United States in recent years through the work of Rob Reich, Anand Giridharadas, David Callahan, and others, and reforms of the sector are being discussed,¹⁰ philanthropy continues to enable work on a range of causes and topics in the more traditional sense, both by providing relief as well as addressing root causes of social needs. Many parts of the sector continue to work as far above the partisan fray as possible, and it seems that many wealthy individuals are genuinely interested in working for the improvement of society (Breeze 2021). These efforts seem to be appreciated by the public at large: Despite mounting criticism in recent years, trust in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors in the United States remains rather high (Independent Sector 2020). This seems especially noteworthy in a society where trust in political institutions, credentialed experts, the media, and other social elites has declined (Edelman 2022; Leypoldt and Berg 2021, p. 9). The aforementioned stark political polarization of recent years has led to a form of "tribalization of trust" (Leypoldt and Berg 2021, p. 19) around everything that can be considered part of the so-called culture wars. In light of this, it seems more significant than ever to illuminate the role of philanthropic organizations in the United States and to evaluate their role in shaping public debate and political decision-making in the United States as well as internationally. It remains to be seen whether the nonprofit sector will also see declining levels of trust, especially given developments such as the ever-increasing political polarization in the United States that has already changed (at least parts of) the philanthropic sector, the unprecedented number of megadonors, and the increasing scale of some of the initiatives of donors and their organizations in the 21st century.

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¹⁰ Discussed reform ideas include seeking redistribution through the tax code, eliminating tax exemption, prohibiting philanthropic activity in certain areas, and shifting control of philanthropic funds from donors to recipients or the general public (Saunders-Hastings 2018, p. 150; Reich 2018). There seems to be little activity on these ideas, however. In fact, with the last major tax reform in 2017, deductions for charitable giving in itemized tax returns (that is, larger-scale giving) was favored even more over small-scale giving (Fidelity-Charitable 2020). Yet, there has been some bipartisan activity on the topic of DAFs. At the time of writing, the Accelerating Charitable Efforts (ACE) Act, proposed in 2021, has not passed Congress yet. This act was designed to ensure that more money from DAFs reaches charitable entities faster (Congress 2021).

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