

Obstructing Action: Foundation Funding and U.S. Climate Change Counter-movement Organizations

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Abstract

This paper updates the analysis of funding of the Climate Change Countermovement from 2003 – 2010 to 2003 – 2018, doubling the time period of the previous analysis. Funding for the organizations in the CCCM has continually increased at a rate of 3.4% throughout the time period. The source of the vast majority (74%) of this funding cannot be identified. Where funding can be identified, it is dominated by contributions from a few large conservative philanthropies.

Background

In a 2016 congressional hearing on the climate crisis, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) held up a book entitled “Why Scientists Disagree About Climate Change,” and asked: “Who funded this phony climate science denial textbook that the Heartland Institute published and mailed to thousands of schoolteachers around the country? ... We know it costs a lot of money to print [but] we don't know who paid for it!” (SDC, 2019). The publisher of the “textbook” was the Heartland Institute, a central organization in the Climate Change Counter-Movement (CCCM), a complex network of organizations that functions to obstruct climate action (Brulle, 2020). Senator Whitehouse's question points to the extensive network of anonymous funders that supports the CCCM. This anonymous funding allows unaccountable, unknown entities to promote climate misinformation and obstruct climate action. A number of analyses have shown that one major factor driving the misunderstanding of climate science and an overall lack of legislative action on the issue is a deliberate and organized effort to misdirect the public discussion and distort the public's understanding of climate change (NRC, 2011, p. 35).

In order for these ongoing efforts to continue, it is imperative that CCCM organizations mobilize sufficient financial resources (Jenkins, 1983). Thus an examination of the funding sources of the CCCM can provide a deeper understanding of the institutional dimensions of this effort. The effort to understand the financial support of the CCCM has been the topic of scholarly concern (Brulle, 2014; Farrell, 2015, 2016, 2019). The most extensive such analysis was that of Brulle (2014). In his analysis, he found that over the time period 2003 to 2010, the majority of identifiable CCCM funding came from a number of conservative philanthropies and, increasingly, through Donors Trust, a donor-directed philanthropy designed to preserve funders' anonymity. In this research, we revisit and update Brulle's initial analysis. We double the time-span of the prior study, analyzing data from 2003 to 2018, and add in an analysis of the amount of unidentifiable funds supporting the CCCM.

Methods

This research was conducted using two distinct procedures. First, we compiled a list of organizations identified as belonging to the CCCM. A preliminary list of 508 potential CCCM organizations was assembled from the CCCM censuses found in Brulle (2014), Farrell (2016), and McKie (2018) as well as organizations listed in the database of climate misinformation actors maintained by DeSmog, all members of the State Policy Network, and all members of the Atlas Network in the United States. These

508 organizations were then reviewed and coded as either being part of the CCCM or not. To better focus the analysis, we included only 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) members of the CCCM. This procedure allowed for collection of income data from these organizations' IRS tax returns. The resulting sample contains 128 organizations. After the census of CCCM organizations was completed, a dataset was compiled containing all publicly available private grants to CCCM groups utilizing three sources: Foundation Directory Online (FDO), IRS 990 forms filed by grantmaking institutions, and publicly reported grantee lists published on the websites of grantmaking institutions. Analysis of these grants was then conducted using Python. A full description of the data collection and analysis procedures are provided in the Supplemental Material.

Our dataset contains 49,354 grants from 3,787 foundations to 116 out of the 128 eligible CCCM members, totaling \$2.65 billion, over the period 2003 to 2018. Total contributions to the CCCM during this time totaled \$9.77 billion. It is important to note that only a fraction of the contributions reported here supports work directly related to climate change. We cannot ascertain that any particular grant supports activities directly related to climate change unless specifically stated on the grant records, but the majority of such records include no meaningful information about the purpose of the grant. We therefore report total grants and contributions on the understanding that they show only broad financial support for CCCM organizations, some of which goes towards climate-related endeavors. We use "(total) contributions" to refer to all contributions received by CCCM organizations as reported by the IRS and "(foundation) grants" to refer to the donations captured in our dataset.

Findings

The CCCM grew steadily between 2003 and 2018 in terms of both total contributions and foundation grants at an annual rate of 3.4% in 2020 dollars. Figure One displays yearly total contributions to the 128 recipient organizations, with grants from the top 100 donors distinguished by the category of the grant maker. Contributions increased steadily over the sample period, from \$357 million in 2003 to \$808 million in 2018, with a peak at \$811 million in 2012. A similar trend holds for grants, which account for 26% (standard deviation = 4%) of yearly contributions to the CCCM on average. Family foundations provided the most grants to CCCM organizations. Notably, donor-advised funds (DAFs), which anonymize their donors, grew to account for 18% of all grants to the CCCM in 2018.

A small group of foundations constitute the core of financial support for the CCCM. Figure Two shows the top grant makers and recipients in the CCCM by total grants given or received. The top 1% of grant makers account for 67% of grants, and the top 10% of grant makers account for 94% of grants. Similarly, seven CCCM organizations (5%) receive 50% of all grants. The top three grant recipients—the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Hoover Institution—have remained unchanged since Brulle's (2014) analysis, with some shifts in the order of smaller grant recipients. The top grant makers have changed slightly: The network remains dominated by Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund (DCF), and the Scaife, Bradley, and Koch family foundations, with the Devos family foundations now among the top ten as well. Donors Trust and DCF alone account for 13.7% of grants. These organizations are DAFs

with a central role in coordinating donations to CCCM and conservative organizations while keeping their core donors anonymous.

Alongside the rise in donations through DAFs, 74% of all contributions to CCCM organizations over the sample period come from completely unidentified sources. Figure Three shows a sociogram of the top 1% of grant makers and recipients in the network by total grants given/received, where each line represents all grants between two actors over the sample period, with contribution totals less than \$5,000 removed for clarity. Unidentified contributions are represented by a single node to demonstrate their prevalence, although they come from many anonymous donors. Individual organizations received between 25% and 100% of their contributions from unidentified sources, with no strong ($p < 0.05$) correlations with organizational assets, revenues, or the nature of their engagement on climate change.

These results confirm and extend the initial analysis in Brulle (2014). Our analysis shows that the size and composition of the CCCM has remained remarkably consistent over the time period of analysis. Funding from conservative family foundations and Donors Trust plays a central role in providing this sort of stability. Beyond simply donating, prior research has shown the key coordinating role that family foundations play within the conservative movement, and by extension the CCCM (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018). The overall finding of this analysis of funding patterns shows that both the organizations that receive the funding and the foundations that provide the funds are core institutional actors in the larger conservative movement. The organizational structure of the CCCM is thus fundamentally identical to that of the overall conservative movement, making it legitimate to view the former as a component of the latter. This finding lends increased empirical verification to previous analyses of the CCCM (McCright & Dunlap, 2000).

It also lends support to the finding that funding strategies differ between progressive and conservative philanthropists. The analysis shows a striking stability in funding patterns over the sixteen year time period. The funding strategy of the conservative movement was laid out in the so-called "Fat Memo" (Miller 2005), which informed the giving practices of the Olin Foundation, the first major conservative philanthropy. This strategy has informed subsequent conservative giving strategies. The objective of these funding efforts is to focus on the development and promulgation of a clear conservative viewpoint. To realize that effort, conservative philanthropies have funded a range of organizations that can act to realize that goal on a long-term basis. This strategy focused on the creation and maintenance of conservative think tanks, development of public intellectuals ("thought leaders"), and promulgation of a consistent ideological message. Additionally, conservative foundations focus on building institutional capacity in organizations with strong communications capabilities (Covington, 1997; Bartley, 2010).

This consistent and long-term funding strategy has enabled the development of a cohesive institutional network of conservative organizations that work collectively to promulgate a consistent message. This strategy stands in marked contrast to the funding strategy of progressive foundations, which focus on individual research projects and short-term efforts. As a consequence, the progressive activist organizations and think tanks form a very loose and disconnected network (Bartley, 2010, p. 792). This

differs significantly from the very tight network of organizations and think tanks that comprise the conservative movement. The analysis confirms the long term stable funding that maintains the CCCM.

This analysis still leaves Senator Whitehouse's question unanswered. The source of over three-quarters of the funding of the CCCM cannot be identified. While some of this funding could come from small donations, the existing IRS disclosure rules do not enable any further investigation in this area. Further research is needed to develop new means to extend our understanding of the unidentified funders that created and maintain the CCCM.

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Figures

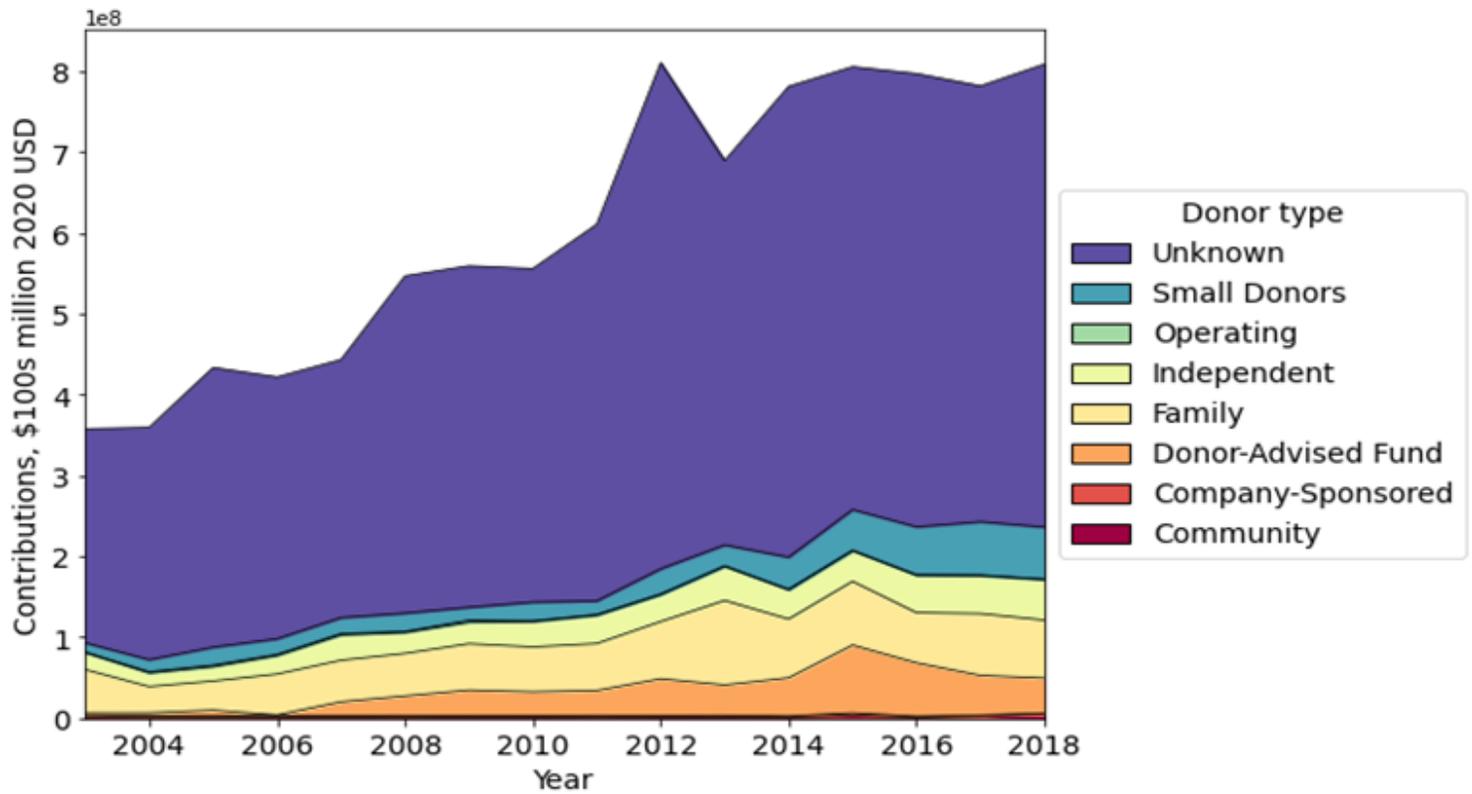


Figure 1

Contributions to CCCM organizations over time

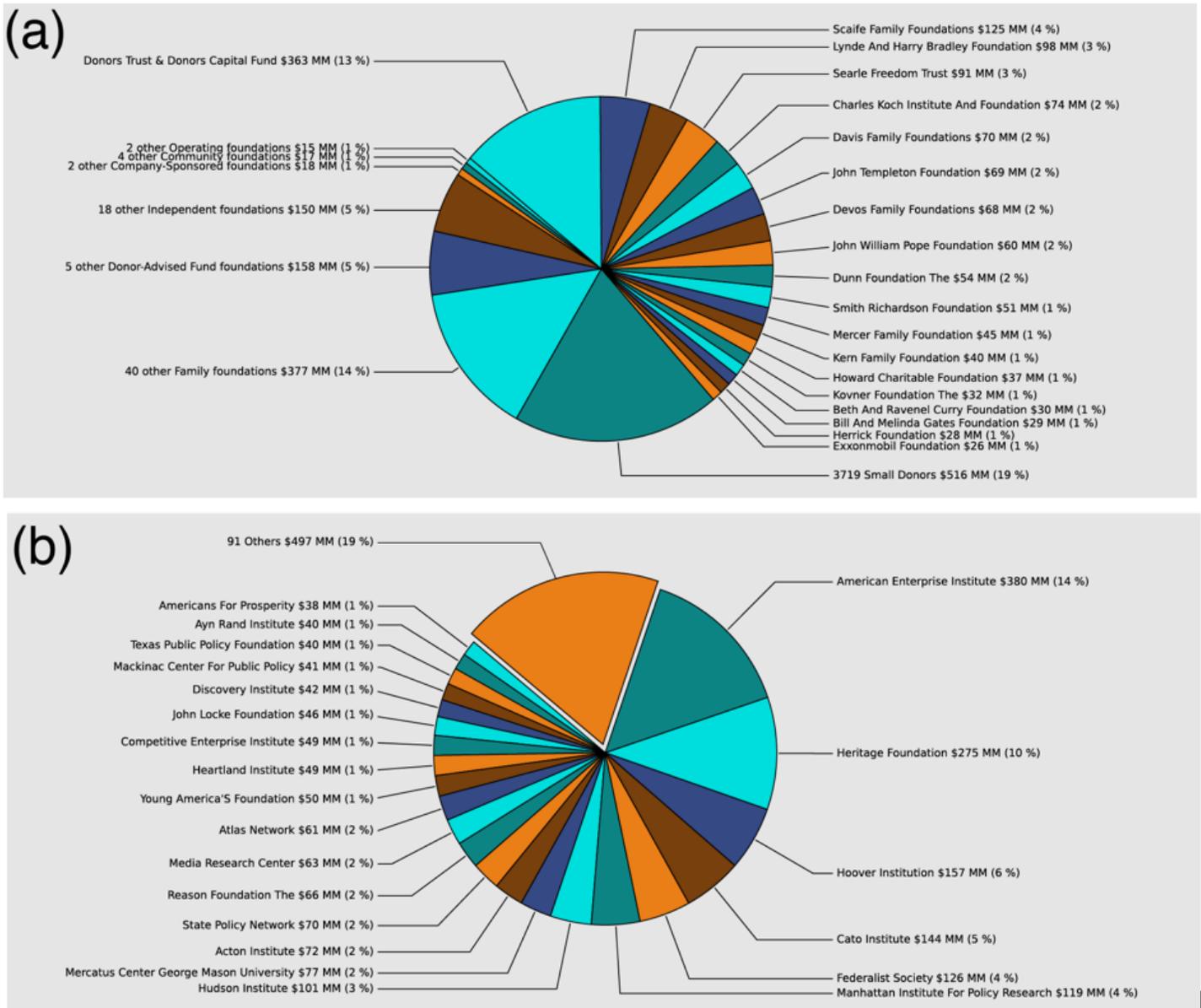


Figure 2

(a) Top grant makers to CCCM organizations, and (b) Top recipients in the CCCM. Note: Shows organizations making or receiving 1% or more of total grants over the period 2003-2018.

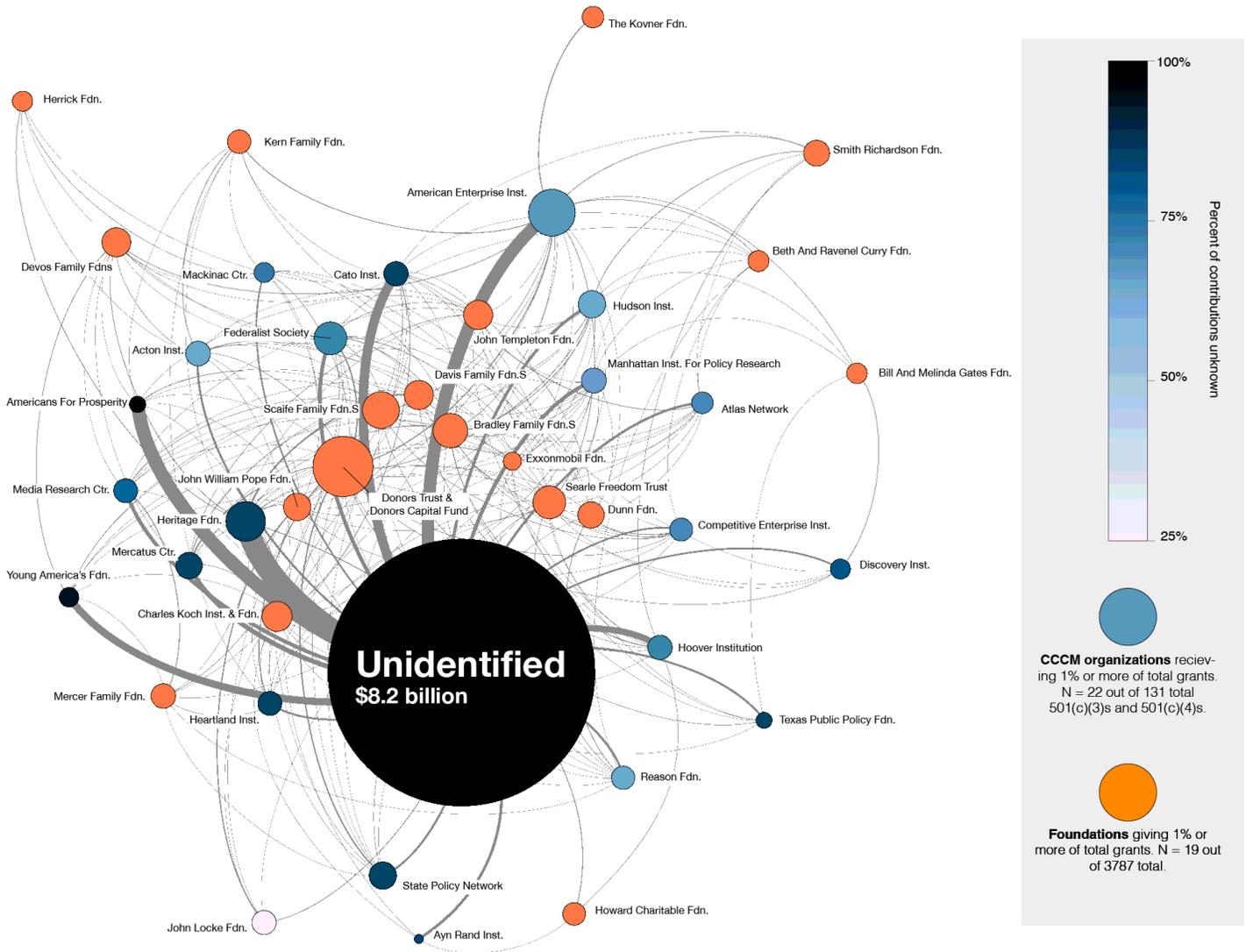


Figure 3

Sociogram of the CCCM core. Note: Lines indicate grants greater than \$5,000. Node sizes correspond to the total number of grants given or received. Only foundations and CCCM organizations which give or receive 1% or more of total grants are shown.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [SupplementaryMaterial.docx](#)