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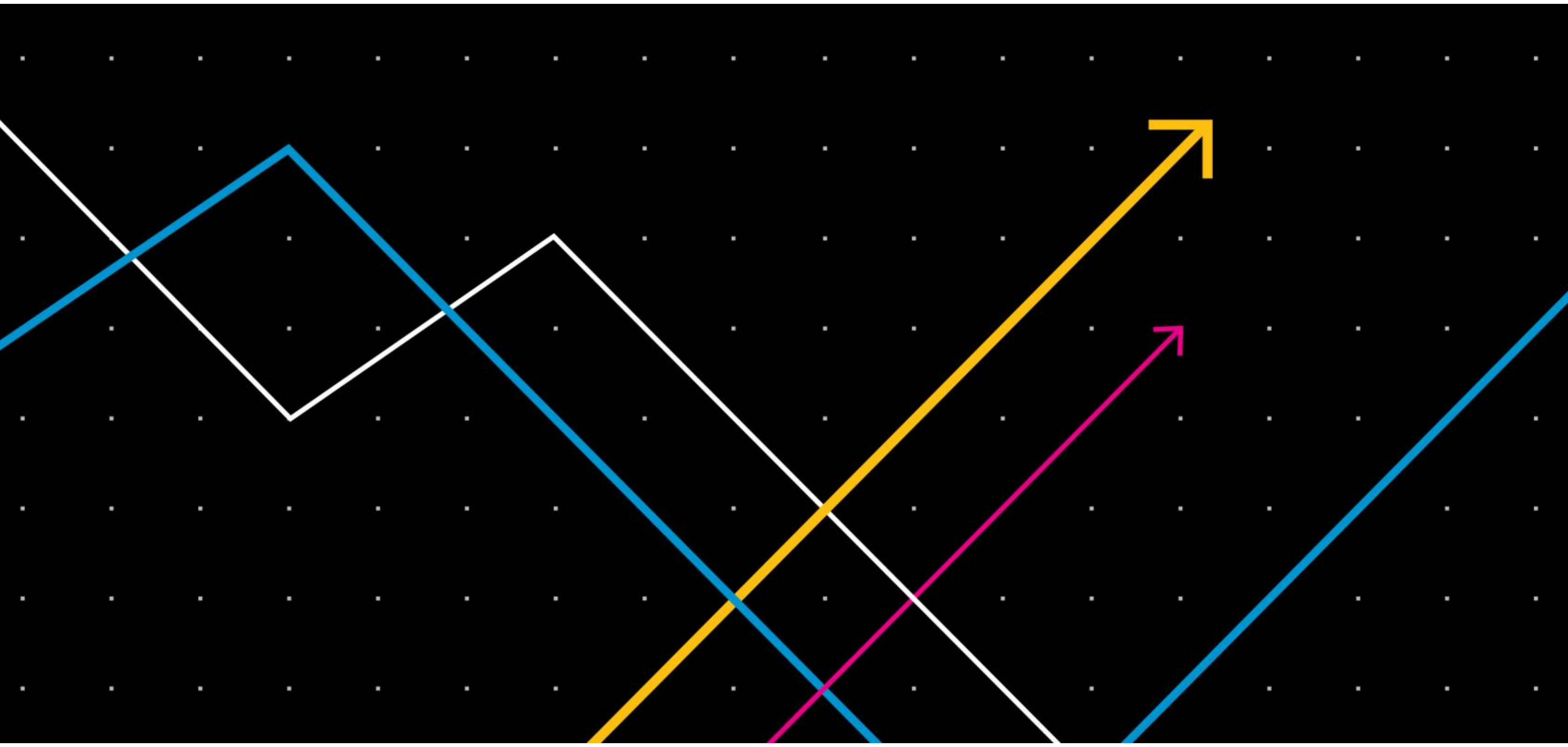

RESEARCH REPORT

Norms and Narratives That Shape US Charitable and Philanthropic Giving

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Executive Summary

The past few decades have brought about a profound shift in the norms and narratives surrounding smaller-scale charitable giving and larger-scale philanthropic giving. In this report, I analyze some of the most significant of those norms and narratives—that is, the rules governing accepted or valued charitable and philanthropic behavior and the replicable, archetypal stories that have developed to make sense of that behavior. I also examine how those norms and narratives have been shaped by and have shaped responses in the United States to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the mass protests after the killing of George Floyd. This analysis focuses on two clusters of giving norms and narratives: one surrounding the relationship between large-scale and small-scale giving, and one surrounding time-based considerations in giving. Its key findings are as follows.

Large-scale philanthropy has become increasingly public and routinely critiqued. One of the most important norms surrounding philanthropy that has developed over the past decade has encouraged living donors to conduct their giving in a public manner, pushing back on an older norm that prioritized donors' privacy and discretion. This norm toward publicity has been accompanied by another that affirms the value of scrutiny and critique of philanthropy by the general public. Together, these norms of publicity and criticism have fostered a host of philanthropic narratives, including narratives celebrating donor entrepreneurialism, warning about donors' excessive power, and focusing on "tainted money." Norms promoting more public philanthropy have also encouraged philanthropic conspiracy theories. The COVID-19 crisis heightened the attention on philanthropy. For some, this has meant encouraging an understanding of the pandemic as a "test" confronting philanthropy that donors can pass and in doing so gain legitimacy. For others, it has stoked critical attention directed toward large-scale giving, including conspiracies.

The rise of large-scale philanthropy has been increasingly understood in the context of the imperiled status of small- and medium-scale giving. But the pandemic has boosted confidence in the power of "everyday giving" and checked the narrative of its decline relative to larger-scale philanthropy. Over the past decade, the growth of large-scale philanthropy has often been associated in public discourse with rising levels of wealth and income inequality, and with concerns regarding the vitality of an American tradition of mass giving. These concerns persisted even as new forms of person-to-person giving through crowdfunding platforms emerged. The charitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the protests in the wake of George Floyd's killing addressed some of these concerns. The media focused more on smaller-scale forms of giving, especially those involving mutual aid and person-to-person cash transfers. This attention signaled the strengthening of giving norms and narratives that recast dominant attitudes about how best to help those in need, emphasizing solidarity and trust in the decisionmaking of recipients, and potentially posing a challenge to established norms encouraging giving to tax-exempt nonprofits.

The past decade has also seen a significant increase in giving norms and narratives related to timeliness, which I define in two ways: as a norm elevating temporality as a mode of analysis with respect to decisions on giving, and as a norm insisting upon the giver's responsibilities to the present moment. The report chronicles some of the developments that fostered the growth of norms of timeliness, including the increased prominence of engaged living donors and a "giving while living" ethic; mounting challenges to perpetual institutions and the increased popularity of time-limited philanthropic institutions; the growth of donor-advised funds, which raise questions about the speed at which philanthropic funds should be disbursed to working charities; the emphasis on "distributive immediacy" and the commitment of some large-scale donors to get funds out the door as quickly as possible; and the spread of crisis-based giving and a concomitant ethic of responsiveness.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified time-based norms and narratives. This includes a heightened commitment to rapid-response philanthropy and charitable giving to address immediate needs, calls for increased foundation payout and challenges to the legitimacy and purpose of endowments, and the growing salience of temporality within public discourse about philanthropic and charitable giving.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic and protests against racial injustice have prompted a realignment of giving norms and narratives, it is unclear whether this shift is permanent or bounded to the pandemic. That answer will depend partly on who has and who wields the power to define and delimit what constitutes a crisis after the pandemic ends.

Norms and Narratives That Shape US Charitable and Philanthropic Giving

The past year has been one of prolonged, cascading disruption in the United States. A tangle of crises has crowded hospitals, shut down schools, filled the streets, toppled statues. The coronavirus pandemic has devastated the economy and killed more than 500,000 Americans, while the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and the ensuing protests against anti-Black violence cast a light upon the country's legacies of racism and the deep racial inequities afflicting our economic and social systems. These have precipitated transformations in social practices that were, until recently, beyond the scope of most imaginings. Underlying many of these changes are profound shifts in widely held norms and narratives—that is, the rules governing accepted or valued behavior and the replicable, archetypal stories we have developed to make sense of that behavior.

Charitable (or smaller-scale) and philanthropic (or larger-scale) giving have both responded to and reflected the tumult of the past year. Donations have poured in to address needs resulting from the pandemic (and occasionally to mitigate or prevent a future pandemic) and to advance racial justice. Many of the norms that govern giving and the key narratives that undergird our most prominent accounts of charity and philanthropy have themselves been transformed by the interlocking crises of the pandemic and systemic racial inequity. Our expectations about who gives; about how, why, and how much we give; and the reasons we value giving have been shaken and at times reconfigured.

For all these reasons, we now speak about life (or death) before the coronavirus—and after. The writer Arundhati Roy has described pandemics as portals, which "have forced humans to break away with the past and imagine their world anew." Yet just as the COVID-19 crisis has built upon and deepened existing inequities, and just as there are important continuities between the challenges we are facing during the pandemic and the challenges we faced before it, many of the changes in giving norms and narratives have emerged out of precrisis dynamics.[1] Similarly, to the extent that current crises are encouraging Americans to imagine anew what it means to be charitable, or to rethink how we assess the value or meaning of philanthropy, preexisting allocations of resources, power dynamics, and the "stickiness" of past practices and beliefs constrain that reconceptualization. So though leaders of charitable or philanthropic institutions might talk about the "history-turning" nature of the present, which has led them "to unapologetically reconsider convention," we must also be attuned to the possibility and the lure of continuity, to the prospect that significant change will not occur. The crises might open a portal, but that does not mean we will all walk through it.[2]

This report considers some of the key norms and narratives that shape charitable and philanthropic giving, focusing on how they have developed during the COVID-19 crisis and recent movements for racial justice, how they might be shaped by those events, and what might happen after the pandemic subsides. The norms addressed are both descriptive (widely shared expectations about charitable and philanthropic giving stemming from current practice) and prescriptive (common beliefs about how people *should* give, even if current practice falls short). The report also pays close attention to how giving norms and narratives are braided together and how they amplify (and, at times, challenge) each other.

One key question this report asks is how the norms and narratives governing philanthropy (i.e., larger-scale giving) relate to those governing charitable giving (i.e., smaller-scale giving). Analysis of giving norms and narratives is complicated by the fact that there are now so many of them: as Inside Philanthropy editor David Callahan has noted, during the past several decades, with the generation of massive new fortunes and the proliferation of multiple philanthropic power bases, a unitary philanthropic establishment centered in the large foundations of the Northeast and Midwest has fractured. Whereas the dominant philanthropic norms were once largely set by the leaders of the Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie Foundations, there are now multiple centers of philanthropic power (whether linked by industry, geography, or ideology). Legacy institutions contend with megadonors for influence; social media allow the leaders of smaller foundations to amplify their voices well beyond the scale of their resources (Callahan 2017, 34–35). Similarly, for the past several decades, the power of charitable intermediaries such as United Way that for much of the second half of the 20th century exerted a strong influence over giving norms has been eroding, giving way to a trend toward disintermediation that has in turn freed up space for the development of alternative forms of giving. This has led to a profusion of giving narratives and norms, all somewhat unstable and open to challenge and interrogation from multiple directions. Their multiplicity compels us to ask: Who creates these norms, who enforces them, and who opposes them? Who tells narratives of giving, and whose stories are heard?

This report is not meant to be a comprehensive survey of giving norms and narratives. Instead, it closely analyzes two clusters of norms and narratives: (1) those involving the relationship between large-scale and small- and medium-dollar giving, and (2) those involving temporal considerations in giving.[3] Its aim is to shed light on how norms and narratives, both separately and in relationship, shape our beliefs about private giving and how we act on those beliefs.

The Rise of Large-Scale Philanthropy

Over the past two decades, perhaps the dominant giving narrative in the United States has been that detailing the explosive growth in large-scale donations from the nation's wealthiest individuals. The prominence of this narrative stems from the generation of enormous private fortunes in this second Gilded Age—according to *Forbes*, there are now more than 2,000 billionaires, nearly a third of them US citizens—coupled with the decision of many of the wealthiest Americans to actively engage in philanthropy. This trend in turn reflects two intertwined and deepening norms about large-scale philanthropic giving: the wealthiest are increasingly expected to give significant sums to philanthropy and to do so publicly (although no consensus exists regarding what proportion of their wealth they should give or how open to scrutiny their giving must be).[4]

The Presumption of Publicity for Large-Scale Giving

The presumption of publicity has replaced a norm that for much of the 20th century governed interactions between major individual benefactors and the public: philanthropy was largely a private affair between donors and grantees, with little space for the public as an interested third party. The norm toward philanthropic discretion appealed to wealthy donors in part because it shielded them from solicitations and judgments, but it also appealed to those who valued modesty and even anonymity as affirmative ethics.

For small- and medium-dollar donors, the norm toward discretion and privacy still holds—or at least, there does not seem to be significant pressure to treat charitable giving as a subject of public attention, reflection, or scrutiny. People might post about their charitable giving on Facebook, for instance, but such giving rarely elicits public conversation or critique. In a recent study for the "How We Give Now" research project, participants "noted how infrequently they talk about their giving with anyone, including family and friends" (Bernholz and Pawliw-Fry 2020, 13).[5] Yet for large-scale donors, this norm toward discretion does seem to be eroding. The nation's wealthiest individuals are increasingly expected to commit to active philanthropic engagement as a key element of their *public* personas. Not every billionaire meets this expectation, but the failure to do so is increasingly registered, leaving a derelict giver open to censure and a diminished public status. Claims that a wealthy person prefers to give in secret in ways the public cannot fully appreciate—such as those raised in defense of Apple cofounder Steve Jobs's record as a philanthropist a decade ago—now seem wholly inadequate.[6]

The norm toward publicity is especially significant because it helps propagate and enforce others. It encourages a sort of feedback loop: the more the public hears about large-scale philanthropy, the more clearly all philanthropic norms (including the one toward public giving) can be defined and policed. To the extent that major donations or pledges are now being announced via media like Facebook posts (e.g., by Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg) and the *New York Times* op-ed page (e.g., by Mike Bloomberg), norms and narratives about individual large-scale giving that might in the past have spread slowly among a select set of intimates now circulate widely.[7]

This norm toward publicity is being bolstered by intensifying public demands for philanthropic accountability and by donors' interests in self-promotion and in shaping the behavior of their peers. The initiation of the Giving Pledge in 2010, a campaign led by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett to convince the world's billionaires to give at least half their wealth to philanthropy, represented a key milestone in entrenching this norm. The signatories were required to make a public statement as a means of encouraging others to sign on, and several have stated that they abandoned a prior commitment to discreet giving in order to serve as models for others. For instance, when Oracle founder Larry Ellison signed, he claimed that he had done much of his previous giving "quietly—because I have long believed that charitable giving is a personal and private matter." Yet he decided to go public with his giving because his friend Buffett asked him to do so, insisting it would be "setting an example" and "influencing others to give."[8]

The most recent illustration of the power of this norm toward engaged public giving is the turnabout in the philanthropic profile of Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. Until a few years ago, Dorsey faced criticism over his relatively meager public record of philanthropy. Like other tech titans have done, he initially deflected such criticism by claiming he had performed much of his philanthropy in private. As a spokesperson told an inquiring journalist, "Meaningful charitable giving does not require public recognition." Yet during the COVID-19 crisis and amid recent protests against anti-Black violence, Dorsey has exhibited a very different approach. He made a public pledge—via a series of tweets, unsurprisingly—of $1 billion toward COVID-19 relief and set up a spreadsheet, open to the public, updating his gifts in close to real time. "I've discovered and funded ($40mm) many orgs with proven impact and efficiency in the past, mostly anonymously," he acknowledged in a tweet. "Why the transparency? It's important to show my work so I and others can learn."[9]

The Narrative Power of Philanthropists as Entrepreneurs

Whereas legacy foundations dominated the philanthropic landscape during the latter half of the 20th century, individual philanthropists have done so in the 21st. Engaged living donors have the power and resources to reshape giving norms (such as those around publicity), and they have done much to recast narratives, in part because narratives attach themselves more easily to individuals than to institutions.[10] Many of the most prominent narratives associated with living donors in recent decades have been rooted in the figure of the entrepreneur. The importation of market-based norms and narratives into the realm of philanthropy lies at the heart of philanthrocapitalism—perhaps the dominant mode of thinking about philanthropy in the 2000s. As the authors of the book that coined the term explain, “One key ingredient of philanthrocapitalism is the responsibility and willingness of economic winners to... apply to their giving the same talents, knowledge, and intellectual vigor that made them rich in the first place” (Bishop and Green 2008, 271). (The subtitle of the book’s first edition, “how the rich can save the world,” did not lack for narrative flair.)

The figure of the philanthrocapitalist drew sustenance from the much deeper narrative reservoir of the epic hero. In fact, one reason why an entrepreneurial ethos proved so powerful was because it was so well adapted to a kind of story-telling, borrowing its tropes from deep-seated archetypes. A bold leader takes on a clearly defined problem, poses a well-defined solution, and assumes great risks, resulting in a clear resolution: either victory or failure. The entrepreneur also embodies certain norms, such as devotion to innovation and scale.

Entrepreneurial norms and narratives have by no means disappeared from the philanthropic sector—a recent Netflix documentary on Bill Gates, for instance, is steeped in them. But in the nonprofit sector there is growing resistance to the fundamental tenets of philanthrocapitalism and increasing insistence that philanthropy should maintain norms and narratives distinct from those that have developed around for-profit institutions. Phil Buchanan, president of the Center for Effective Philanthropy, has written that although he has heard for years that “donors need to act more like businesses,” in his experience, “The most effective givers…know that, while their business acumen (or that of their forebears) may have created their wealth, giving effectively requires a different set of skills. It necessitates a different level of collaboration and relationship-building, deep humility, and a recognition of how difficult it is to chart cause and effect” (2019, 4).[11]

Critical Narratives Surrounding Philanthropy

Yet in shaping attitudes toward the extraordinary recent surge in philanthropy, norms and narratives related to entrepreneurialism now contend with others related to mounting concerns about wealth inequality and power disparities, concerns that leading philanthropists themselves frequently voice. “It’s not right for individuals to accumulate a massive amount of wealth that’s equivalent to millions and millions of other people combined,” Laurene Powell Jobs told an interviewer for the *New York Times.*

“There’s nothing fair about that.” Many of the criticisms that people who share these concerns make of philanthropy are not new; they have formed a narrative counter to celebrations of American philanthropy for more than a century. In the past decade, though, this counternarrative has come to rival that celebratory narrative to such an extent that it is difficult to say which is dominant in public discourse.[12] Many of these critiques are ideological, involving, for instance, ideas about the dangers of plutocracy or the antagonism between capital and labor. But they also make use of powerful narrative forms. This report is not the place for a full itemization of the various contemporary criticisms of philanthropy. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate the archetypal stories about giving they often borrow and adapt.

One especially prominent narrative views philanthropy as a form of reputation laundering, whereby wealthy individuals and families cultivate an identity as generous benefactors while obscuring the disreputable, at times even illegal, sources of their fortunes. In recent years, this critique’s increased prominence has led to a narrative expansion that incorporates more vividly and insistently into accounts of philanthropy the means of wealth accumulation; the details of the right hand taking and the left hand giving are more commonly told as one coherent story. In fact, as some critics have adopted a decolonization lens, that story now often incorporates the legacies of slavery and the dispossession of indigenous populations.[13] In the past several years, the controversy over the philanthropy of the Sackler family, whose firm Purdue Pharma developed and promoted the use of the painkiller OxyContin and has been credibly accused of exacerbating America’s opioid crisis, provided a cinematic version of this tainted-money narrative, the final scene of which saw the Sackler name chipped off the walls of a university they had funded.[14]

There is also a related narrative of philanthropy as a form of amassing privilege—giving as a means of getting. Although the characters and the benefits accrued vary, this is the common line linking exposés of the wealthy using large gifts as a way to get children admitted to prestigious universities, accounts of high-profile investigations into the Trump Foundation’s self-dealing (which led New York’s attorney general to close it down in 2018), and analysis of the considerable tax benefits philanthropy can provide donors. All these critiques are posed against a traditional (and deeply religious) narrative of *sacrifice*, whereby giving is deemed authentic and commendable to the extent that it reveals a willingness to accept real loss. For this reason, these critiques are also allied with the increasingly frequent dismissals of celebrations of large gifts that emphasize the relatively small share of donors’ total wealth that they represent. Critiques that present philanthropy as an expression of privilege are also related to narratives of philanthropy as a means of exercising plutocratic power over the polity, securing the policy objectives of the wealthy, threatening democratic norms, and weakening tax-funded institutions (Collins and Flannery 2020; Reich 2018).[15]

Uniting all these narratives is a norm directed not toward the conduct of donors but to that of beneficiaries and the broader public. This norm stresses the importance of taking a critical stance toward major donors and their gifts. Again, criticism of philanthropy is by no means new, but it long contended with a social norm that deferred to givers' prerogatives and celebrated the pluralism promoted by the expression of donors' individual preferences. Some in the philanthropic sector still champion this more accommodating norm, such as one Philanthropy Roundtable official who recently insisted that "all charity is good charity."[16] This norm was generally endorsed by fundraisers and tapped a general ethic of polite society: it was best not to look a gift horse in the mouth or to bite the hand that feeds. But there is a growing counternorm that holds that institutions that solicit donations have a responsibility to scrutinize where those donations come from and that the broader public should be sensitive to how philanthropy shapes public attitudes toward concentrated wealth. This norm extends to questions of effectiveness and equity and encourages people and institutions not to simply defer to donors' preferences. Gifts that might not necessarily come from tainted sources or have harmful effects in their own right can be critiqued based on the greater good they might have done if directed elsewhere. (This norm, it should be stressed, does not seem to apply to small-scale givers.) For example, high-profile critics have slammed large donations to higher-education institutions with already large endowments. Such criticisms are summed up by the headline of an article written by Dylan Matthews: "For the love of God, rich people, stop giving Harvard money."[17]

As the public norm of critiquing philanthropy strengthens, no clear norm guiding philanthropy's response is emerging. Are donors obligated to engage the critiques or can they ignore them? How strenuously should the prerogatives of philanthropy be defended? Some commentators have suggested that the surge of critical narratives amounts to a "War on Philanthropy" that will dampen large-scale donations or lead to an elite "giving strike." The interplay between the norm toward publicity and the norm toward critique is one reason public discourse often seems so saturated by narratives of philanthropy. Nearly any new major donation—say, gifts addressing the fire that damaged the Notre-Dame cathedral, funding college scholarships for disadvantaged youth, or supporting research on a COVID vaccine—now initiates a sort of ritualized exchange in public discourse, whereby news coverage prompts critique followed by a confused countermobilization from the defenders of philanthropy.[18]

The last kind of critical narrative that has ripened in the current climate is the philanthropic conspiracy, which often involves two of the most prominent contemporary philanthropists, Bill Gates and George Soros. Philanthropic conspiracies are also not new; they have always grown alongside fears of concentrated power and wealth. Early in the 20th century, when a foundation funded by John D. Rockefeller sought to combat hookworm in the American South in part by discouraging people from walking barefoot (which allowed hookworms to enter their bodies through the soles of their feet), one theory proposed in a southern newspaper held that Rockefeller was supporting the effort because he had cornered the leather market and hoped to make a killing when people purchased shoes. By midcentury, many philanthropic conspiracies had moved on to claims that foundations were abetting communism in the United States; in recent decades, they have often sought to implicate philanthropy in a diabolic, globalized new world order. There are often kernels of truth in these conspiracies, especially as regards the power imbalances they expose; they are sometimes grafted on to well-documented, progressive critiques of megaphilanthropy as a key upholder of global capitalism. In fact, these conspiracies can be understood as metastasized narratives, malignantly overwhelming the bounds of discernable, verifiable facts. They hold up a dark mirror to the entrepreneurial narrative, locating immense power in individuals to change the social order, though for overwhelming ill. Their ubiquity in the history of American philanthropy is a reminder of the power of narratives to shape (and misshape) thinking about how and why individuals give.[19]

Philanthropic conspiracies, especially ones generated by right-wing sources, have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, in part because of the prominent place that some philanthropists (most notably Bill Gates) have occupied as interpreters of the crisis, as critics of the Trump administration's response, and as leaders of efforts to create a vaccine. "In posts on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter," the *New York Times* noted in April 2020, Gates was "being falsely portrayed as the creator of Covid-19, as a profiteer from a virus vaccine, and as part of a dastardly plot to use the illness to cull or surveil the global population…Misinformation about Mr. Gates is now the most widespread of all coronavirus falsehoods tracked by Zignal Labs, a media analysis company." A May 2020 poll from Yahoo! News and YouGov reported that more than one-quarter of those surveyed, including 44 percent of Republicans, believed that Gates was "plotting to use a mass COVID-19 vaccination campaign as a pretext to implant microchips in billions of people and monitor their movements." After the killing of George Floyd, George Soros soon reclaimed his status as leading philanthropic bogeyman of the right wing, with conspiracy theories alleging he had orchestrated the protests against racial violence that swept the country and that he was encouraging violence and "domestic terrorism" (some theories held he had even helped fake Floyd's death). According to analysis conducted by the Anti-Defamation League, in the days following Floyd's killing, negative Twitter posts about Soros jumped from approximately 20,000 to more than 500,000 a day.[20]

Narratives of Mass Giving's Decline in the United States

In recent years, the narrative surrounding the rise of large-scale giving has often been tethered to one detailing mass or smaller-scale giving. Indeed, for much of the past century, the vitality of mass giving was the dominant narrative surrounding charity in the United States and one of the primary narratives at the heart of American national identity. Americans believed themselves to be exceptional givers who met crises through neighborly generosity. This narrative had a definite political utility, justifying the lack of a robust welfare state. For instance, during the early years of the Great Depression, when congressional Democrats sought a federal appropriation for the Red Cross, President Herbert Hoover rejected the need for public funding, urging Americans instead to give voluntarily to charities. This was, he argued, "the American way of relieving distress among our own people." But, as sociologist Elisabeth Clemens (2020) recently pointed out, this faith in Americans' charitable capacity cannot be reduced to antistatist propaganda; the nation's leaders have also embraced voluntary giving as a means of building up national solidarity and a shared civic identity.[21]

At various points over the past century, leaders from charitable and fundraising organizations raised concerns about the vitality of this tradition of mass giving. Often, wealthy individuals, uneasy with the charitable burdens they were asked to bear, sought to invigorate mass giving as a means of distributing that burden more equitably throughout the community (a 1909 survey, for instance, that showed that Cleveland's wealthiest 1 percent contributed the vast majority of funding for the city's social welfare agencies and that just six donors contributed 42 percent of that funding, prompted the establishment of the Cleveland Federation for Charity and Philanthropy, the nation's first community chest). These efforts worked, and by midcentury, mass giving campaigns, especially on behalf of national health charities and local United Ways, had become a defining feature of the American charitable landscape. One study from 1950 estimated that 80 percent of all charitable giving came from Americans with incomes below $5,000. As late as the early 1980s, John Gardner, formerly Lyndon Johnson's secretary of health, education, and welfare and a leading figure in the nonprofit sector, could declare that "for the most part private giving in this country is a Mississippi River of small gifts." He was not wrong. At that time, surveys suggested that five out of six US households contributed to charity and that 85 percent of all charitable giving came from individuals earning less than $50,000 a year.[22]

This narrative highlighting Americans' proclivity for giving has been remarkably persistent and is regularly rekindled in the aftermath of natural disasters, when donations surge in response, and during the year-end holiday giving season, when annual totals of aggregate charitable giving are announced. But for the past two decades, more discordant notes have entered the narrative, as claims that small- and medium-scale giving are in some state of decline, peril, or devaluation have become more prominent. According to the most comprehensive and widely cited longitudinal study of charitable behavior in the US (conducted by the University of Michigan), the share of US households giving to a legally recognized charity declined from 66 percent in 2000 to less than 54 percent in 2016.[23]

An especially precipitous drop in giving occurred after the Great Recession (particularly among households making less than $50,000 a year), suggesting a connection between mounting financial precarity and the decline of the "everyday donor." That connection contributed to narratives of charitable giving being linked to broader narratives about income and wealth inequality (which have recently surged in the United States). Reports that the contributions of small- and medium-dollar donors constitute a decreasing share of total giving are the flip side of reports that large-scale giving comprises an increasing share, and both are part of the story of the rise of plutocratic power in the United States. For instance, the share of total charitable giving itemized on income-tax returns by people with $1 million or more in adjusted gross income grew from roughly 10 percent in 1993 to nearly 32 percent in 2016. These sorts of trends have driven a narrative of usurpation, in which what had long been considered a distinctive tradition of mass giving threatened to become the exclusive practice of people with the most financial resources. This narrative was boosted when the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 decreased the incentives for most taxpayers, beyond the wealthiest, to claim a charitable deduction and therefore to have their giving subsidized by the government. The alarming misalignment between federal tax policy and the celebrated story of a democratic and participatory giving culture became increasingly difficult to ignore. As Amy Schiller asked in the *Washington Post*, "What happens when only rich people give to charity?"[24]

Of course, not only rich people give to charity. This narrative is based on *relative* trends and on the alarms they raise about rising inequality more generally. Those trends do not negate the vast range of smaller-scale giving that continues to flourish. It is likely, however, that those smaller gifts have been overshadowed by the focus on philanthropy. In other words, the increasingly top-heavy nature of American giving is amplified by the spotlight the media casts on gifts from the wealthiest Americans. In 2018, for instance, although the largest 50 gifts amounted to less than 2.7 percent of total household giving in the United States, a cursory scan of the top stories from that year about charitable and philanthropic giving reveals they received considerably more scrutiny from journalists and researchers than a strict adherence to those percentages would recommend.[25]

Countering the Decline of Mass Giving: Expanded Definitions and Crowdfunding

There are structural reasons for the disproportionate media attention that large gifts receive: it is generally easier to construct compelling narratives from the actions of a prominent individual than from a mass of people. And some critics would argue that because megaphilanthropy is so entangled with the politics of inequality, the disproportionate amount of attention it receives serves the important civic purpose of highlighting America's unequal distribution of resources. But alternative narrative strategies are also being used to counter the disproportionality in media attention. One such strategy is to challenge what counts as giving in public discourse and in popular tallies, moving beyond monetary contributions to tax-exempt charitable organizations to include person-to-person giving, remittances, crowdfunding, political giving, conscious consumption, mutual aid, activism, volunteering, and other forms of community service. A more expansive definition of giving would change which norms and narratives gain the most prominence. Encouraging that expansion requires challenging the primacy of tax-exempt monetary donations (affirmed in tax policy and in much popular discourse) and rethinking the approaches we take in our public accounting of charitable giving. To cite one example, there has been a push in recent years to reconsider who qualifies as a "philanthropist," a term that has often been associated with large donations and carries a presumption of attention and significance. Claiming the title for small-scale giving could help recalibrate public attention and recenter dominant giving narratives around mass giving. As Angela Dorn, coauthor of *The Black Woman's Guide to Philanthropy*, told the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, "Everyone has the misconception that to be a philanthropist, you have to give enormous amounts of money to a cause and have your name on a building." Besides giving money, she insisted, a philanthropist can also give other resources, including time, talent, and testimony. Others have suggested promoting alternative terms besides philanthropy (e.g., "generosity") that do not have such strong associations with large monetary contributions, which would redirect the attention of researchers and journalists to a broader range of giving behaviors.[26]

Yet although large-scale philanthropy has often overshadowed many types of smaller-scale everyday giving in recent decades, mass giving is too entrenched in civic lore and religious traditions to be easily dislodged. The media, particularly local and social varieties, still hold a soft spot for stories of elementary-school fundraisers, efforts to chip in to buy the beloved custodian a new car, the restaurant server given the massive tip by an appreciative stranger. And the giving that surges in response to crisis—natural disasters, but also human-made ones—regularly affirms a narrative premised on the fundamental vitality of the United States' democratic traditions of giving. In this tradition, one novel strain that has received considerable attention over the past decade is person-to-person giving through crowdfunding platforms like GoFundMe and DonorsChoose. Accounts of such giving gain much of their power by tapping into broader social developments, such as a growing anti-institutionalism and preference for disintermediated relationships, and a movement toward decentralized, nonhierarchical, and self-organizing forms of "New Power" (Timms and Heimans 2018). They also reflect the power of narrative to drive charitable behavior and charitable attention. Many of the platforms channel giving toward the most compelling, digitally "marketable" stories, if not necessarily toward the people in most desperate need.[27]

Yet there are several reasons why accounts of the growth of crowdfunding and informal peer-to-peer giving platforms have, until recently, done little to counterbalance concerns about declining giving to institutional charities. First, to the extent that peer-to-peer giving circumvents traditional tax-exempt charitable institutions, such giving is harder to count and to convert into overall tallies that shape perceptions of dominant giving trends. We simply do not have good data on the scope or scale of person-to-person giving. Anecdotes can sustain narratives of growth or decline for a stretch, but data provide a more secure foundation. Second, crowdfunding and peer-to-peer giving have not secured the fully normative status that giving to a tax-exempt charitable organization has long enjoyed, for numerous reasons. One is the long tradition of suspicion of "indiscriminate almsgiving" in American thought, and long-standing anxieties about giving being squandered on the "undeserving." A good part of the institutional apparatus developed in the past century and a half to channel giving was meant to perform such acts of discrimination, and to the extent that peer-to-peer giving bypasses that apparatus, it can stoke those anxieties (Katz 2013; Kusmer 2002; Soskis 2010). Related to those suspicions and anxieties is the fear of scams and counterfeits, which dog peer-to-peer giving platforms and, when exposed, make especially good stories. Without nonprofit status (a mark of legitimacy and credibility), the lines between showmanship and authentic need were always in danger of blurring.[28]

But lastly, and paradoxically, even when there is little doubt that people's needs are legitimate, because the most successful crowdfunding appeals invariably involve such compelling narratives, they also have tended to attract the scrutiny of those who wish to use them to highlight the holes in the nation's safety net. Inspirational cases of individual generosity have been recast as symptoms of a failed political system, and heartrending stories of suffering and perseverance that have prompted large numbers of donations have become illustrative of our society's unequal distribution of resources. As Jia Tolentino wrote in the *New Yorker*, "There's a certain kind of news story that is presented as heartwarming but actually evinces the ravages of American inequality under capitalism: the account of an eighth grader who raised money to eliminate his classmates' lunch debt, or the report on a FedEx employee who walked twelve miles to and from work each day until her co-workers took up a collection to buy her a car." One could regard the fact that 20 percent of American adults reported having donated to a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds for a medical bill or treatment as a testament to Americans' willingness to care for one another. But one could also understand it as an indictment of Americans' *unwillingness* to care for one another, the consequence of the country's lack of universal health care. Medical crowdfunding, argues the *New Yorker*'s Nathan Heller, provides "a negative-space portrait of our country's teetering medical finances." Notably, a good part of the human services nonprofit sector could be described in similar terms, as a negative-space portrait of the nation's paltry systems of public welfare provision. Yet recently, that critique has been directly especially prominently at crowdfunding, fostering a darker narrative of inadequacy and disappointment that has often overwhelmed more uplifting accounts. Indeed, for all the attention that crowdfunding has received, until the pandemic there was little sense that it was transformative, that the individual acts of generosity it facilitated added up to very much, or that it could provide an answer to the emerging crisis facing everyday giving.[29]

Megaphilanthropy and Everyday Giving during the COVID-19 Crisis

When the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States, several major narratives about the relationship between large- and smaller-scale giving were contending with one other. One highlighting the growth of large-scale philanthropy and gifts from the very wealthy was closely linked to another focusing on declining participation rates and the diminished status of the "everyday giver." Another underscored the adaptiveness and diversity of the giving landscape and featured forms of giving other than donations to tax-exempt charities. This narrative claimed not that everyday giving was undergoing a crisis, but that it was flourishing in ways that were not often easily measured or quantified.

How did the pandemic affect these narratives? In some respects it reinforced them, such as through prominent accounts of megaphilanthropy related to the pandemic. Yet it also boosted narratives about the vitality of small-scale giving. Most significantly, the voluntaristic response to the pandemic has begun to rebalance the competing narratives of large- and smaller-scale giving, restoring something of the former status of the everyday giver relative to the wealthy donor. That rebalancing has promoted giving norms whose influence could endure well after the pandemic subsides.

In the pandemic's early months, considerable media attention was paid to the philanthropic response from private foundations and especially from wealthy donors. A recent Candid and Center for Disaster Philanthropy (2020) report calculated that worldwide, foundations, corporations, high-net-worth donors, and donor-advised-fund sponsors donated nearly $12 billion to address the pandemic in the first half of 2020, an amount that dwarfs the global response to any other disaster or global epidemic in recent memory. Of that total, some 13 percent (more than $1.5 billion) came from high-net-worth individuals. Media focus on these gifts, coupled with reports that the wealth of billionaires worldwide has skyrocketed during the pandemic (Collins and Flannery 2020), has fostered the sense that the crisis has only augmented philanthropists' power. "We are living in their world more than ever," journalist Theodore Schleifer wrote in April 2020.[30]

The Pandemic as "Test" for Large-Scale Philanthropy

One of the main narratives people have used to make sense of this surge of megagiving is that of the "test," a framing that reflects the threats philanthropy has faced to its legitimacy in recent years but that also leaves open the possibility (and fosters the archetypal narrative) of wealthy individuals and their institutions meeting their responsibilities and affirming their status at a moment of crisis. Schleifer, for instance, argued that this "outbreak offers tech billionaires a chance to change the narrative about themselves," at a moment when they have often found themselves under sustained critique.[31]

The prevalence of this "test" narrative has produced little consensus on whether philanthropy is passing. For some conservative commentators, the crisis has offered a chance to affirm the priority of private initiative, especially in light of apparent failures or incompetence of government. "Private wealth to the rescue," crowed the *Wall Street Journal*, which highlighted a collaboration between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Mastercard's Impact Fund, and Wellcome to accelerate development of virus vaccines and treatments. "This is philanthropy's shining moment," *Newsweek* announced, citing funders pushing innovation in testing, therapeutics, and vaccine development.[32]

There have been two main critiques of this narrative. One accepts its premise that the pandemic has represented a test for philanthropy, but judges the results quite differently and so tells a story not of vindication but of abdication. Critics argue that the wealthy are not doing enough to respond to the crisis; even for those who share a belief in the responsibilities of wealth, there is no consensus as to the point at which those responsibilities are met. In May 2020, surveying what he considered the lackluster contributions of San Francisco's wealthiest citizens to relief efforts in the city, the *New York Times*' Farhad Manjoo lamented that "the Bay Area billionaires are breaking my heart." In June, the *Washington Post* published an analysis of the publicly announced pandemic-related giving of the nation's 50 wealthiest citizens and families. The *Post* calculated that the collective net worth of these people was some $1.6 trillion, and that of that amount, they had donated $1 billion, "which sounds like a lot of money but adds up to less than 0.1 percent of their combined wealth." The median American family giving 0.1 percent of its wealth, the paper pointed out, would amount to a contribution of $97.[33]

Other critics have rejected the narrative describing the pandemic as a test for billionaires. For them, the spate of pandemic-related megadonations has only underscored the dangers of plutocratic giving and the need for a better-resourced public sector. As Tara Isabella Burton cautioned in the *Washington Post*, "What capitalism's victors are contributing to the coronavirus effort now should not be celebrated as altruistic charity but rather evidence of the broken system we have helped them build." For such critics, the fact that a narrative about the generosity of billionaires has solidified during the pandemic amplifies the danger of large-scale philanthropy and the risk it poses of legitimizing a fundamentally maladjusted economic system.[34]

In the early months of the pandemic, these concerns about the inordinate power concentrated in the hands of megadonors stirred existing apprehensions about philanthropy overwhelming everyday giving. One narrative that began to develop linked economic crisis with declines in charitable giving among medium- and small-dollar donors. That narrative, which does not hold true for all periods of economic decline, took root during the Great Recession, when total charitable giving fell by 7.2 percent in 2008 and by another 8.0 percent in 2009. The decline was especially steep among lower-income households, and evidence suggests it owed not merely to Americans having less money to give but to the experience of financial precarity (Meer, Miller, and Wulfsberg 2016).[35] In fact, when the scale of the economic damage wrought by the pandemic became clear, nonprofit leaders began to express alarm that they would soon face a shortfall from charitable contributions, even as demand for services skyrocketed (nonprofits that were not directly addressing the pandemic were especially concerned about a likely drop in contributions). Early reports seemed to justify this fear. According to the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, after holding steady in January and February 2020, total giving declined 11 percent in March compared with the previous year, and it declined 6 percent in the first quarter of 2020 compared with the first quarter of 2019. In response to a May 2020 global survey, 73 percent of charities reported that contributions had declined. In response to a July 2020 Lake Institute on Faith & Giving survey, 41 percent of religious congregations reported that total giving had declined during the first months of the pandemic.[36]

The COVID-19 Crisis, Mutual Aid, and the Revitalization of Everyday Giving

Yet the numbers soon began to tell a different story: that economic crisis was not depressing everyday giving but boosting it. Even in the first months of the pandemic, reports suggested that donations of less than $250 were up. Although "many larger donors pulled back because of the decline in the stock market," as the secretary of the Fundraising Effectiveness Project steering committee explained, "the everyday person who gives smaller amounts stepped in to fill the void." A *Chronicle of Philanthropy* study of 116 large charities raising roughly 10 percent of all charitable contributions in the United States found that giving to them in the second quarter of 2020 was nearly 41 percent higher than a year prior. This increase did not just come from large gifts: "Of the 94 organizations that answered a question about small gifts, 55 said they had seen an increase in contributions that probably came from low-income or middle-income Americans." Similarly, the Fundraising Effectiveness Project found a 7.5 percent increase in charitable giving in the first half of 2020 compared with the year before, driven especially by donations of less than $250, which increased by more than 19 percent. The final tallies from GivingTuesday (the Tuesday after Thanksgiving), which saw some $2.47 billion given in a single day (a 25 percent increase from 2019), gave numeric expression to what the organization that sponsors the movement called the "massive swell of generosity" that had swept the country during the pandemic. Reports of those figures, and the myriad "stories of generosity" shared by the day's promoters, affirmed a narrative of rejuvenated charitable giving rooted in the contributions of everyday donors.[37]

Even as large-scale giving grabbed headlines throughout 2020, small-scale, local, and neighborly modes of giving rivaled it for attention. The media quickly became saturated with accounts of voluntary aid, part of a broader narrative emphasizing that disasters tend to bring out the best (not the worst) in people.[38] Americans (like citizens of other countries) donated supplies to food pantries and stocked community fridges. They delivered groceries and medicine to the homebound, and they made masks in their living rooms. At colleges and universities, they created spreadsheets to register people who needed help with housing or storage or bare necessities. They also gave money to established nonprofits, including food banks and shelters and relief funds set up by community foundations and United Ways. No single national charity attracted the bulk of funding in the early months of the crisis, as the Red Cross had in past emergencies. Public discourse seems to have focused less on the organizations being funded than on the manifold acts of giving themselves.

The Multiplicity of Forms of Pandemic Giving

The early narratives about generosity during the pandemic were defined by a multiplicity of forms that seemed to overwhelm the standard categories and demarcations associated with giving narratives. Action and vigor were celebrated, but so too were inaction and restraint; staying home and social distancing (or paying others to do the same) became understood as forms of civic action rooted in solidarity, and were frequently discussed in the context of more traditional forms of voluntarism. According to one survey, nearly half of US households reported having engaged in forms of "indirect giving" unique to the pandemic, such as paying for services they did not receive. "We are each sacrificing our daily routines—our gyms and coffee shops and offices—to keep health-care professionals from becoming overwhelmed," noted one author in the *Atlantic*. "It is a collective act of almost unprecedented community spirit." In March, one prominent journalist tweeted out a list of "ways to sustain your community if you have income right now," which included subscribing to local newspapers, ordering books through local independent bookstores, ordering coffee by the pound from local coffee shops, donating to food banks, and tipping well when ordering in. That jumble of generosity, in which sending money to traditional tax-exempt charities was mixed in with a host of other commercial acts, and all were treated as equally commendable, was a defining characteristic of narratives of the early charitable response to the COVID-19 crisis.[39]

One element these narratives shared was the sense that such hyper-local forms of voluntary action revealed something good and decent about the American people. A palpable sense of relief seemed to suffuse media accounts of generosity related to the pandemic, as if inspirational stories of phone banks and meal deliveries were palate cleansers after years of coverage of debased public discourse. "We may be worried about the character of America's top leadership in this coronavirus crisis," wrote one *Washington Post* columnist. "But we don't have to worry about Americans," who are "willing to step up and help others." An author declared in the *Atlantic*, "The response to COVID-19 should stand as one of the most beautiful moments in our country's long history, a moment of shared, galvanizing national spirit that has existed in perhaps only in a handful of epochal years before, like 1776, 1861, 1933, and 1941, and, in modern times, after 9/11." Some nonprofit leaders even expressed hope that these responses presaged a sort of charitable revival that would restore the vitality of the tradition of mass giving to tax-exempt charities. For instance, Brian Gallagher, then–chief executive of United Way World, wondered whether the pandemic would renew Americans' commitment to charitable giving: "We've lost that ethos in our country," he told the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. "We've lost our sense of community. We've lost our trust in institutions."[40]

As Gallagher's comments suggest, some of the accounts of Americans' generosity had a nostalgic undertone, a sense that dormant traditions were being renewed or revived. Yet what could be portrayed as a shift in practice—the rise, as discussed below, of new forms of mutual aid and community care—could also be understood in terms of a shift in attention. Modes of informal neighborly assistance that Black, Brown, and immigrant communities have long used to respond to economic precarity gained narrative prominence after that precarity was widely experienced by others.

Moreover, while the surge of giving was tied to practices stretching back decades (even centuries), it was also associated with the emergence of systems of "New Power," distributed and nonhierarchical, that have transformed American and global civil society over the past few decades. The response to the pandemic and the protests against racist violence and for racial justice elevated small, local grassroots organizations and directed unprecedented attention and charitable donations to many of them. This constituted a recalibration of charitable norms, often implying a critique of giving to larger, more bureaucratic, national organizations.[41]

The Rising Prominence of Mutual Aid

One of the primary ways increased attention has been directed to smaller-scale giving during the pandemic is through the spotlight that has been cast on mutual aid. The term mutual aid was coined more than a century ago, and its historical roots in the United States extend back even further, to 18th-century associations established by immigrant and Black communities to care for their own. Yet mutual aid has experienced a recent renaissance, feeding a primary narrative about the charitable response to COVID-19. At its heart, it involves people in a community helping each other, based on an ethic of shared responsibility and reciprocity. During the pandemic, mutual aid networks have proliferated, often using online digital platforms like Google Docs or Slack to match volunteer capacity to community needs. A Detroit mutual aid network featured by the *New York Times*, for instance, was organized on Facebook and arranged child care, distributed toilet paper and face masks, donated no-strings-attached cash, and helped people out of work find jobs.[42]

In the giving narratives that developed during the pandemic, mutual aid is distinguished by a number of key characteristics. First, although some accounts of mutual aid involve profiles of select organizers or an emphasis on online platforms, accounts typically focus on mutual aid networks and on the bonds of solidarity uniting people in them. The fact that the pandemic has affected nearly all Americans (if not necessarily in equal ways) has allowed many people to participate in such collectivist terms. The range of assistance these networks provide underscores their horizontal structure and egalitarian basis; because everyone can help and be helped, the lines between giver and recipient are blurred. In fact, how recipients of aid have found purpose and comfort in being able to assist others has been a powerful element of narratives emerging from the growth of mutual aid.

Second, mutual aid is often defined in terms of opposition: against the state and its bureaucratic parameters or its authoritarian tendencies, or as a response to its failures to provide adequate support; against established, formalized nonprofits that are legally entangled with the state; or against charity as an ideal. The latter definition has been especially prominent, representing charity as hierarchical, unidirectional, and premised on a social distance between donor and beneficiary (Spade 2020). Mutual aid is also at times defined against philanthropy, because it does not require monetary contributions or privilege the contributions of the financial elite. Narratives of mutual aid that draw on these definitions frequently critique existing systems of charitable distribution.[43]

Lastly, mutual aid has often been presented in explicitly political terms. "With mutual aid, even getting groceries is a political endeavor," Maryam Shariat Mudrick, cofounder of the Astoria Mutual Aid Network in New York City, told a journalist. Another organizer in Astoria explained mutual aid as "a political process through which communities that have been ignored and deprived deliberately empower themselves with the resources they have to take care of one another." Although crowdfunding could be described similarly, accounts of mutual aid often carry the promise of social transformation, marking and advancing what one person involved in mutual aid in Minneapolis called a "radical moment of possibility." This is a variant of a long-standing narrative genre that attends to small acts that combine to produce lasting change (a similar narrative has been developing in the political realm, where small-donor donations have fueled prominent electoral efforts, most notably Bernie Sanders's presidential campaigns).[44]

Indeed, multiple high-profile accounts have portrayed mutual aid as a form of resistance, one that indicts the individualism undergirding neoliberalism and that seeks to foster new social relations that imply a critique of capitalism and racism (Spade 2020). Traditional charitable giving and even crowdfunding have been critiqued for reflecting the failures of the systems of public and private support that they operate in; mutual aid can make a similar critique, and is often assumed to exist outside of those systems. As one Michigan mutual aid worker told the *New York Times*, "Caring for each other will ultimately make a difference. It's a long haul for changing people's minds and changing the way that they view and treat their neighbors. But it's definitely not insignificant and it's not removed from political ideology at all."[45]

This understanding of mutual aid as an instrument of change was reinforced when the COVID-19 crisis converged with global protests against anti-Black violence sparked by the killing of George Floyd. Those protests not only kindled widespread interest in past experiments by Black radicals in community-based mutual aid (such as the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for Children program; Heynen 2006; Spade 2020); they also prompted new mutual aid networks and funds (as has occurred in the wake of other protests against police violence in the past decade). In Minneapolis, for instance, South Minneapolis Mutual Aid Autonomous Zone Coordination quickly formed after protests shut down large parts of the city, gaining some 20,000 members to help "find low-cost eyeglasses and car repairs, air mattresses and coolers for tent communities, cash for families' rents, diapers and medicine," among other services. (Notably, this sort of community action received less media attention than violent protest and vandalism in the city.) And some of the leading champions of mutual aid in the United States, those most frequently cited in accounts of its growth, are closely associated with the Movement for Black Lives or the prison abolition movement.[46]

This narrative of its radical potential is not the only narrative about mutual aid. Another is rooted in an older history of ethnic, religious, and fraternal aid organizations and is tied to an antistatist politics that is decidedly more conservative (Beito 2000). In this narrative, mutual aid flourished before the advent of the welfare state, which "crowded out" various forms of voluntarist self-help and which must be pared back to allow what Ronald Reagan termed "the great American spirit of neighbor helping neighbor" to flower. Of course, for conservatives, this spirit is not only American. In Great Britain in September 2020, the Conservative member of Parliament Danny Kruger, tasked by the prime minister "to sustain the community spirit we saw during the lockdown," celebrated the more than 4,000 "spontaneous 'mutual aid groups'" that emerged during the crisis in Britain and that reflected the "general phenomenon of neighbourliness across the country" and the potential for "community power [to] replace…the dominance of remote public and private sector bureaucracies." Moreover, many who have gravitated toward mutual aid networks during the pandemic have done so not because of ideological or political intent, but because of their hyperlocal character or coverage in local media. Dean Spade, an activist and one of the leading contemporary theorists of mutual aid, has warned of the danger of attempts to incorporate mutual aid into a heroic "narrative about volunteerism" which dulls its radical message (2020, 33). As he recently told the *Washington Post*, "In covid, mutual aid became mainstream." Given this range of engagements with mutual aid, one cannot assume its growth will necessarily foster radical social change, or even a narrative that ties "community power" with social transformation.[47]

A key question emerging from the recent growth in mutual aid and its prominence in narratives about the charitable response to the pandemic is what long-term impact it will have on giving norms. It is too early to answer definitively, and two very different scenarios are plausible. First, the rise of mutual aid could provide evidence against narratives that charitable participation among "everyday givers" is eroding and instead drive narratives of charitable revitalization. This could stem either from an expansion of the definition of charitable giving to include mutual aid, or from participants in mutual aid networks feeling inspired to make financial contributions to community-based service-oriented nonprofits. Either case would require a tempering of the critical stance of practitioners of mutual aid toward traditional charity. Some signs suggest that the lines between mutual aid and traditional charitable institutions have begun to blur during the pandemic as mutual aid networks have become more complex and formalized. In fact, some networks have decided to "nonprofitize" and to transform into tax-exempt organizations to gain legal protection for their workers or to attract more funding.[48]

The second possible scenario is that because mutual aid is so often defined in opposition to charity (charity being defined as monetary contributions to professionalized tax-exempt nonprofits), its rise could end up being understood as occurring at charity's expense. Its increased prominence during the pandemic could presage a longer-term shift in giving norms, whereby monetary and nonmonetary contributions to informal networks of care function as *explicit* substitutes for charitable giving to tax-exempt nonprofits.

The Surging Popularity of Cash Transfers during the COVID-19 Crisis

Besides mutual aid, the most significant shift in giving norms associated with responses to the pandemic has been the widespread popularity of direct cash transfers. This development has bridged institutional and individual practice; large-, medium-, and small-scale giving; and private philanthropy and government funding. Cash has won over funders who once shied away from it as a philanthropic instrument and regarded it as belonging to a realm of traditional "charity" that they explicitly eschewed in favor of political advocacy, support for research, or the funding of nonprofit institutions. As an official at GiveDirectly, a nonprofit that has been at the forefront of the push for cash transfers for more than a decade, explained, "I haven't seen a period like this where so many people from so many different types of philanthropy have started with cash transfers as a primary tool in their toolbox."[49]

The primary appeal of direct cash transfers during the pandemic has been speed. Offered with few strings attached and with minimal bureaucracy, cash transfers and direct relief initiatives have put money in the hands of people in need quickly, often as recipients have waited on government stimulus checks or unemployment benefits. Many of the funds that have administered cash transfers have targeted particular communities and specific populations (as journalist Marc Gunther has noted, funds have been designed for librarians, bartenders, restaurant workers, and actors). Funds have addressed the needs of gig and tipped workers, whose incomes dried up with the enforcement of social distancing. In California and Massachusetts, foundations have established or supported "undocufunds" that direct relief to the families of undocumented immigrants, who have often been ineligible for federal and state benefits. Other funders have directed cash relief to more broadly defined populations. In March 2020, Stand Together, the "philanthropic community" founded by conservative donor Charles Koch, partnered with Family Independence Initiative to provide direct cash assistance to 10,000 families identified by local community organizations. GiveDirectly established a goal of raising $100 million to send $1,000 directly to 100,000 economically vulnerable families across the United States. In fact, GiveDirectly emerged as one of the more celebrated charities throughout the first months of the COVID-19 crisis. It received high-profile endorsements (and funding) from celebrities including Ariana Grande and Rihanna, from major philanthropists including MacKenzie Scott and Jack Dorsey, and from progressive political leaders including Stacey Abrams.[50]

The pandemic has also prompted a surge in person-to-person crowdfunding as people have turned to platforms like GoFundMe, Venmo, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter to identify and then transfer cash to people hit hardest. According to GoFundMe, in the six months after March 1, 2020, people started more than 150,000 fundraisers for COVID-related assistance on the platform; over the past year, "an American has started a COVID-related fundraiser on GoFundMe every two minutes." In April 2020, #TwitterFoodBank became a top trending Twitter hashtag. As Vox's Dylan Matthews explained, "Families in need tweet using the hashtag, explain how they're struggling economically, and leave their account name with Square's Cash app, which enables strangers reading their tweet to send money their way."[51]

Protests occurring after the killing of George Floyd also highlighted the popularity of direct cash transfers. Donors gave cash to injured or arrested protesters, to the families of people who had been killed by the police, to Black-owned businesses, and to Black community members in need. In Portland, Oregon, the Black Resilience Fund, set up by a local activist, raised money on GoFundMe and gave $300 cash grants to thousands of applicants. A memorial fund set up by Floyd's brother received the most individual donations (more than 500,000) to one campaign in GoFundMe history. Although in many situations direct cash assistance is still connected to traditional forms of charitable giving and to a more conservative politics, during the past year, many of these sorts of crowdfunding campaigns and cash transfer initiatives have signified a form of protest against the political, economic, and nonprofit status quos. "We were told our government would take care of us, that someone would be there to take care of us when we need it, but I asked for help and they told us no," a 26-year-old information technology professional who had received cash assistance through his Venmo account and from a Seattle mutual aid network told a journalist. "It seems like the only thing we can do is help each other." Indeed, because many crowdfunding campaigns are framed as communal responses, they share some of the radical overtones of mutual aid (and many mutual aid networks also administer direct cash assistance programs).[52]

The proliferation of direct cash transfers and the entrenchment of norms based on them have built on earlier experiments and initiatives (public and private) that have been gaining momentum for several decades. In the late 1990s, governments in Latin America designed conditional cash transfer programs, and similar initiatives were taken up by countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, cash transfers were adopted by humanitarian nongovernment organizations to respond to natural disasters and to address extreme poverty. The "rise of digital payment systems, widespread cell phone ownership, and increased access to financial services" in countries around the world has made cash transfers technologically more viable; in 2016, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for cash-based programs to become "the preferred and default method of support" for humanitarian aid. In 2017, GiveDirectly, which pioneered a series of unconditional cash transfer programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, began an unconditional cash transfer program in the United States as a response to hurricanes that had swept the region. Moreover, in the past decade, the idea of universal basic income has become more popular globally, and in the United States was recently championed by former presidential candidate Andrew Yang.[53]

The increasing popularity of direct cash transfers has been made possible by a transformation of key narratives. For centuries, skepticism toward giving money directly to people in need has been fueled by fears that recipients will waste the funds on alcohol, drugs, or unnecessary extravagances. But proponents of cash transfers have cited research finding that recipients tend not to spend the money on such "temptation goods" and that in fact, they tend to reduce their spending on them. Instead, supporters of cash transfers have told another kind of cautionary tale whereby in-kind aid fails to address people's needs. For instance, one journalist reporting on giving in response to Hurricane Harvey noted stacks of donated designer jeans, boxes of moldy secondhand clothing, and mildewed couches sitting in warehouses.[54]

Direct Cash Transfers and Narratives and Norms of Trust-Based Giving

Providing cash to those in need puts authorship of the giving story more firmly in the hands of recipients. People can use it to buy what they consider necessary or most helpful, which might not conform to the giver's expectations and can differ in significant ways from the things prioritized by programs or funders. That cash enables people to spend on their own individual needs (e.g., for job training, medicine, a new roof, clothes, an updated cell phone, groceries) has become a crucial element of the broader cash narrative. In fact, the popularity of cash transfers promotes a particularly powerful giving norm that prioritizes the agency of recipients in the giving exchange and that affirms the belief that the people closest to a problem know best how to deal with it. So even though cash transfers, according to a recent report, are "among the most well-researched and rigorously-evaluated humanitarian tools of the last decade," they also carry a critique of a technocratic orientation. As one advocate noted in *Christianity Today*, cash transfers "avoid a patronizing approach endemic to so many programs, in which 'experts' make decisions for the poor instead of empowering the poor to make the best decisions they can for themselves." At the very least, the rising popularity of cash, and the data on its cost-effectiveness, represents a "benchmark" that other programs must meet to justify not deferring to the judgments of recipients.[55]

As many donors have turned to cash giving during the pandemic, norms promoting recipients' agency have been strengthened by another related set prioritizing speed, urgency, and the need to check a donor-centric orientation. In describing this shift, Oprah Winfrey cited one of the most prominent examples of a nexus of narratives and norms in modern charitable giving: "What this pandemic has done is make me think of giving differently," she explained. "I've ultimately always believed that you teach people to fish, you lift them up. But sometimes people just need fish and a piece of bread." That oft-cited parable of teaching a person to fish promotes a gospel of self-help, and it suggests that knowledge and insight travel from the giver to receiver. In times of crisis, cash giving challenges that assumption. Philanthropic foundations have made similar reconsiderations after realizing the many different needs that the people most deeply harmed by the pandemic have experienced. "I think it's just a recognition that with so much unemployment, people need food assistance, they need rent assistance, but they also need just the basic capital to handle their day-to-day business," Tonia Wellons, president of the Greater Washington Community Foundation, noted when explaining the foundation's embrace of cash transfers. "The widespread impact has forced people to say, 'Yep, people need money.' They need money in their own hands so they can have agency over how they respond to this pandemic." As another foundation leader asked in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, "Could we do just as much good handing out $100 bills on the street corner in low-income neighborhoods (if we could do so without transmitting the virus) than using our traditional approach to grants?" This scenario, and others allied to it, have planted the seeds for a powerful narrative that counters the "teach a person to fish" parable and that could transform giving norms (for individuals and institutions) in the coming years.[56]

How precisely might the turn to cash giving shape giving norms and narratives when the pandemic subsides? Donors' experience with cash could reinforce it as an emergency measure, the default response for future crises, though this could mean it will not be used as much during "normal" periods. The popularity of cash transfers during the pandemic could also have other, indirect influences by reinforcing broader trends in philanthropic norms toward what has recently been termed "trust-based philanthropy." Well before the pandemic, nonprofit grantees were pushing back against an older, entrenched set of norms in the philanthropic sector that privileged funders' prerogatives, insights, and objectives, and encouraged short-term program-related grants with frequent benchmarks and targets. Instead, advocates were calling for flexible, long-term, unrestricted funding. For instance, in 2016 the Ford Foundation unveiled Building Institutions and Networks, a $1 billion initiative offering five-year, unrestricted funding to grantees, with significant capacity-building support.[57]

The emergency-response nature of much pandemic-related grantmaking has given a boost to trust-based philanthropy, as funders have sought to minimize administrative burdens on grantees. Many foundations have converted program-related grants to unrestricted funding, added additional years of funding to grants, and suspended reporting requirements. Soon after the pandemic hit the United States, the Ford Foundation joined more than 40 major national and international foundations in pledging to adopt such funding practices (as of this writing, nearly 800 had done so). A September 2020 survey of more than 250 foundations reported that 85 percent claimed to be adopting more flexible grantmaking practices for existing grantees. A Center for Effective Philanthropy survey released in November 2020 reported that since the pandemic began, 66 percent of foundations surveyed were loosening or eliminating restrictions on existing grants, 64 percent had reduced what they asked of grantees, and 57 percent were making new grants as unrestricted as possible (Orensten and Buteau 2020a). Behind such reforms is a normative shift similar to that associated with direct cash transfers that centers grantees' and recipients' needs and experiences. Both emerging trends are fueled by trust, which in turn is sustained by narratives of giving in which promoting the agency of beneficiaries is considered a good in itself and a means of achieving long-term impact.[58]

As with the surge in direct cash transfers, it is not entirely clear what will happen to the push for trust-based philanthropy after the pandemic. An updated survey from the Center for Effective Philanthropy released in December 2020 showed that the embrace of unrestricted giving was widespread; for more than half of the foundations surveyed, this was a new practice taken up since the pandemic began. Among those foundations that had adopted such practices, some 55 percent reported that they would continue them after the pandemic. However, as an accompanying Center for Effective Philanthropy report explains, "Most foundations reported that they will do so to a lesser degree than their current pandemic practice. Furthermore, about 30 percent are unsure whether they will continue these practices" after the pandemic (Orensten and Buteau 2020b, 4, 12). These results raise important questions about norm changes during periods of crisis. For some foundations, the pandemic was a catalyst, transforming their thinking about practice in ways that will endure. For others, the changes to norms will be understood largely as emergency measures. Yet the lines between these categories will likely be porous, as foundations' experience offering unrestricted grants and nonprofits' experience receiving them will exert a force after the crisis with unpredictable effects. It may well be that foundations that assumed they would be in one category find themselves in the other after those experiences and expectations, and the narratives they have informed, have had time to coalesce.[59]

The Development of Norms around Time-Based Giving

The proliferation of COVID-19 emergency response funds, many of which have administered some form of direct cash transfer, suggest another set of norms and narratives that have been reconfigured during the pandemic: those relating to temporal (time-based) considerations. These emergency response funds prioritize getting money out the door as quickly as possible and are allied with the rapid-response funds that have become more popular in the past decade. They join other approaches to giving—and of thinking about giving—that emphasize "timeliness," to borrow a term from former Sears, Roebuck president Julius Rosenwald, champion of the spend-down foundation in the early 20th century. As an ethic that shapes giving norms and narratives, timeliness can carry two meanings. First, it can denote the elevation of temporality as a mode of analysis with respect to philanthropy, without designating any particular relationship between giving and time. Second, it can insist upon the giver's responsibilities to their particular moment, an imperative that stakes donors more closely to contemporary needs and exigencies, against strong claims to intergenerational equity.[60]

Well before the pandemic, a growing commitment to timeliness among donors and the general public (reflecting both of the above meanings) was transforming giving norms and narratives. This section sketches out some of the most significant transformations. Many relate to large-scale philanthropy; although this section touches on transformations involving small- and medium-scale giving, the question of what those transformations are requires further analysis. All these changes served as kindling that, when sparked by the sense of crisis provoked by the pandemic, generated a surge of time-based and crisis-related norms and narratives.

The Rise of Giving While Living

Early-20th-century philanthropists such as Rosenwald and Andrew Carnegie called on businessmen to actively engage with their giving. Throughout the century, though, it became more common for philanthropy to be delayed until late in life, a pastime to occupy retirement that donors frequently delegated to tax lawyers or financial advisers, or shunted off into a bequest. Engaged living donors were relatively rare and did not dominate the philanthropic landscape. When Waldemar Nielsen, one of the 20th century's most perceptive observers of the philanthropic sector, surveyed the largest foundations in the 1970s and 1980s, he was actually struck by how *disengaged* their founders were. "Far from being wise, farsighted, public-spirited, purposeful benefactors, many of the big donors set up their foundations if not in a fit of absentmindedness then simply as part of tidying up their affairs at the end of a lifetime devoted to business and the acquisition of wealth," he noted. "In moving from the profit-making to the not-for-profit sphere, they with few exceptions forgot their accumulated organizational skills entirely" (1985, 4–6, 18).

In the 1990s, however, attitudes toward the timing of major donors' giving began to shift. A norm emerged supporting the engaged living donor (though it had not yet solidified). As late as 1999, a notable philanthropy scholar could write in the *Washington Post*, with a hint of surprise, "Philanthropy has become a controversial matter these days, particularly when donors make their own decisions about how and when to spend their money rather than leaving those details to professionals in the foundations they have set up."[61]

By the new millennium, massive fortunes were being generated by the tech and finance industries mushrooming across the country and often amassed by individuals early in their careers, and major philanthropists, led by Bill Gates, were crafting public identities that blurred the lines between businessperson and benefactor. During this period, conceptions of philanthropy as a vocation to pursue late in life diminished. More and more wealthy people began publicly giving away large shares of their fortunes during the nontwilight period of their lifetimes, and taking an active role in that project.

The rise of an ethic of Giving While Living has also generated a range of new temporally based giving narratives, rooted in the individual rather than the institution. Given that major donors are now encouraged to begin their philanthropic careers earlier in their lives, their giving intersects with a novel constellation of major life events; Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan, for instance, pledged to spend

99 percent of their fortune on philanthropy after their first daughter was born, while MacKenzie Scott developed her distinctive approach to giving in the aftermath of her divorce from Jeff Bezos. Starting earlier means that philanthropists face much longer horizons of giving, offering more room for experimentation and risk-taking. The norms around Giving While Living have therefore encouraged giving narratives that feature digressions and detours, the philanthropic dead ends that have been normalized as a key component of a "learning by giving" strategy. Lastly, the spread of this ethic and corresponding notions about the timing of giving means that major giving increasingly *coincides* with the processes (and narratives) of wealth accumulation. When philanthropy was performed as a coda to a business career, certain narratives were privileged, such as those regarding giving as redemptive or as entirely detached and elevated from the sordid realm of capitalist accumulation. Getting *while* giving not only encourages the celebration of entrepreneurialism that is central to philanthrocapitalism. It also compels increased scrutiny toward the relationship between capitalist accumulation and philanthropic redistribution, on "tainted money," and on philanthropy as a form of "taking."[62]

A Renewed Challenge to Perpetuity

For the first half of the 20th century, no dominant norm dictated decisions about foundations' life spans. There were major foundations like the Carnegie Corporation that existed in perpetuity, limited-life institutions like the Rosenwald Fund, and a middle ground of foundations whose charters allowed for a potential spend-down but placed the discretion with trustees. That indeterminacy meant that foundation leaders frequently deliberated about time frame and time span. Policies linked to foundations' life spans, including the question of whether they should dip into the corpus of their investments, "should be reviewed frequently in the light of changing financial conditions and world needs," the Rockefeller Foundation board stated in 1964 (Abrahamson 2013, 296).

Norms favoring perpetuity solidified in the final decades of the century, as foundation leaders mobilized against a proposal to mandate lifespans on foundations that was advanced during the passage of the Tax Reform Act of 1969. A sectorwide philanthropic identity cohered around the *right* to perpetual life, which ultimately tilted toward a presumption of perpetual life. Increased power granted to accountants and tax lawyers over philanthropic norms in the wake of the Tax Reform Act strengthened the status of perpetuity as the default structure for philanthropic foundations (Frumkin 1998, 266–86).

Over the past few decades the default of perpetuity has been eroded by a counterethic advanced by some of the country's most prominent philanthropists, who have eschewed perpetuity in favor of establishing philanthropic institutions that would disburse their funds in "some limited or defined period of time." This ethic has highlighted the responsibility of the donor to their own age; Chuck Feeney, whose Atlantic Philanthropies became the largest limited-life foundation to close its doors in September 2020, explained that his decision to "spend-down during my lifetime" was based on his recognition that "today's needs are pressing," and on his confidence that "the future will bring a new generation of philanthropists" to address future needs.[63]

For several decades, philanthropy analysts claimed they detected the stirrings of widening support for limited-life philanthropy, though perpetuity remained the dominant temporal orientation among existing private foundations (Boris, De Vita, and Gaddy 2015, 20; Renz and Wolcheck 2009, 2–3, 9). In the past decade, it seems that support for limited-life philanthropy has grown more pronounced (it has been championed by major donors such as Bill and Melinda Gates and Zuckerberg and Chan) and that the dominance of perpetuity has eroded even further to such an extent that it is unclear whether it still can be considered the default. A recent report analyzing a survey of private foundations from Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and NORC at the University of Chicago noted that "nearly half of the organizations established in the 2010s were founded as time-limited vehicles," whereas for organizations established in the 1980s, the proportion was closer to 20 percent (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and NORC at the University of Chicago 2020).

The report also noted that more attention is being paid to timeliness, regardless of the decisions about time frames philanthropic institutions end up making. Whereas foundation leaders in the final decades of the 20th century rarely "intentionally discussed or planned their institutional philanthropic timeframes," its authors note, in recent years, "in part due to innovations driven by shifting social norms and the rise of strategic philanthropy, organizations are considering the length of time over which they want to operate as a core component of their strategy" (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and NORC at the University of Chicago 2020, 4–5). Moreover, whereas limited-life philanthropy has been publicly championed as an alternative philanthropic norm by some of the wealthiest, most prominent living donors (those likeliest to draw the most attention to discussions of timeliness), few living donors have defended the model of perpetuity. What defenses have been made have most often come from the heads of legacy foundations, who often have less power to shape public discourse.[64]

Donor-Advised Funds

The proliferation of donor-advised funds (DAFs) is one of the most important developments in charitable giving in the past few decades. Donations to DAFs increased from $7.1 billion in 2008 to

$38.8 billion in 2019. In fact, between 2010 and 2019 the share of giving to DAFs as a percentage of total individual giving in the United States nearly tripled from 4.4 percent to 12.7 percent. In 2016, for the first time in the quarter of a century since the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* began tracking the charities that received the most donations each year, a DAF sponsor, the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund, occupied the top spot of the rankings, pushing aside United Way. The following year, 6 of the top 10 charities in the *Chronicle*'s rankings were DAF sponsors. For the past three years, Fidelity Charitable was also the nation's largest grantmaker. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of individual DAF accounts rose by an annual compound rate of 33.8 percent; last year, the growth rate slowed to 19.4 percent, to a total of 873,228 accounts. Although the average DAF is larger than $160,000, several of the leading DAF sponsors, including Fidelity Charitable, have done away with the $5,000 deposit minimum in an effort to "democratize" DAF-holding and encourage smaller-scale giving (Collins, Flannery, and Hoxie 2018, 7–8; National Philanthropic Trust 2021; Sherlock and Gravelle 2012, 12).[65]

The rise of DAFs as a key instrument of individual charitable giving reflects the ascendance of numerous giving norms, among them the declining status of charitable bureaucracies and the prioritization of donor control. It is also reshaping time-based norms. Unlike private foundations, which are legally required to pay out 5 percent of net investment assets annually, DAFs have no such mandate. Their growth has prompted debates about giving time frames, with disputes centering on how to calculate the actual DAF payout rate and on what the rate suggests about the threat DAFs pose to an affirmative ethic of timeliness. Critics accuse DAFs of facilitating the irresponsible warehousing of funds and point to the gap between when DAF holders receive a tax break for giving to them, subsidized by the public, and when the public can enjoy the benefit of those funds, through the funds reaching nonprofits. Defenders of DAFs insist their payout rates are higher than those of private foundations and that DAFs are attracting funds that would otherwise not be committed to philanthropy. At the very least, much as the rise of private foundations in the 1940s and 1950s provoked a debate in Congress and beyond about philanthropy time frames, the rise of DAFs has boosted the prominence of timeliness as a category of analysis in campaigns of philanthropic reform.[66]

Distributive Immediacy

The challenge to DAFs reflects the contemporary salience of a norm that tethers philanthropic and charitable responsibility closely to current needs and that values putting money in the hands of operating charities over the possibility, promise, or pledge of future support (even if by waiting, the funds to be disbursed would be larger through investment returns). This challenge has at times demanded a redefining of what actually *counts* as giving. In its most recent tally of the philanthropy of the world's billionaires, for instance, *Forbes* decided only to include "out the door" gifts. In an effort to "shine a light on the billionaires who are putting their philanthropic dollars to work," it did not include gifts to foundations or DAFs, or philanthropic pledges, as it has in the past.[67]

Two of the largest individual donors in 2020, Twitter cofounder Jack Dorsey and MacKenzie Scott, have both espoused public commitments to the norm of distributive immediacy. In her May 2019 statement committing to the Giving Pledge, for instance, Scott signaled her desire to give the vast majority of her wealth away in her lifetime. In explaining why she chose not to wait to give, Scott quoted author Annie Dillard and applied her literary guidance to the practice of philanthropy. "Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book…The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better…Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes." Scott's first set of grants, some $1.7 billion announced in July 2020, was made to 116 grantees up front and without restriction. Her approach to giving highlights the relationship between commitments to distributive immediacy and trust-based philanthropy.

Crisis-Related Giving

Giving has long surged in response to crises (natural disasters, military conflicts, political upheaval, epidemics) that punctuate periods of normalcy. The perception of crisis often exerts a normative weight in favor of giving now rather than later. A variant of the time-based norm surrounding crises is responsiveness, which requires giving not simply to address immediate needs but doing so as quickly as possible, tailoring gifts to what recipients say they need. This norm affects large-, medium-, and small-dollar donors.

Over the past decade or so, the American public has been experiencing a nearly perpetual state of crisis. Some of this has been actively caused by actors in media and politics who thrive on outrage, victimhood, and disruption. But many people have been experiencing very real emergencies. Perhaps most significantly, global warming has increased the frequency of natural disasters, which seem to arrive and demand charitable response with little respite. Even more generally, the immensity of the threat posed by climate change has contributed to an existential dread among many people linked to impending climate catastrophe. That threat has encouraged some philanthropic foundations to spend down. "Given the state of the environment and global warming coming at us like a freight train," the founder of the Beldon Fund has explained regarding his decision to spend down his foundation, "it was unethical to retain money for the future when who knows what the future might look like." For others, climate change calls for dramatically increased financial commitments to the cause, if not to an absolute spend-down. As Larry Kramer, president of the Hewlett Foundation, has argued, with a crisis such as climate change, "The problem is time." Although he defends the merits of perpetuity, he also insists that time is running out to prevent irreversible damage and avoid a doom loop that would undermine nearly all the good work that philanthropy hopes to achieve. "It's time to stop fiddling and help put out the fire," he has urged other philanthropies.[68]

Moreover, funders are increasingly aware that many Americans experience ongoing precarity that is linked to the injustices perpetrated on the most vulnerable by our social, economic, and political systems. This awareness has fostered the growth of rapid-response funds that aim to channel money to activists fighting those injustices and into the hands of the people most impacted by them (TCC Group 2017). In the wake of emergencies or crises that have exposed such precarity, such as the separation of migrant families by US government officials at the US-Mexico border, smaller-scale donors have used online platforms to pour money into the charities that could respond immediately, sometimes even overwhelming those charities' capacity with the scale of funds donated. Although sometimes classified as impulsive "rage donations," their reactive nature also aligns with the belief that those confronting crises often do not have time to wait for donors' rage to subside. In this context, the generally slow pace of foundation grantmaking is regarded by many movement leaders as strategically ineffective and grossly insensitive, a sort of paternalism that imposes funders' time frames on grantees.[69]

Time-Based Norms and Narratives during the COVID-19 Crisis

The pandemic has amplified nearly all the dynamics described above, and in the process has strengthened the norm of timeliness (in both its meanings), as both an analytic category and an affirmative ethic. First and foremost, the crisis has fueled a strong push toward distributive immediacy. "Now is the time for philanthropy to give more, not less," two philanthropy leaders declared in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. There have been widespread calls to prioritize the needs of the current moment and a general movement to reframe saving for the future as a form of hoarding. "The strength of a funder's grantees at the end of this crisis will be a much better measure of the significance of a foundation than the size of its endowment," a consortium of philanthropy-serving organizations declared. "Unprecedented challenges require unprecedented responses—and a casting aside of traditional norms and approaches."[70]

The new norm these leaders hoped would replace traditional ones insists that philanthropy assume a deliberately and explicitly countercyclical function, increasing in times of financial crisis. Unlike during the Great Recession, when foundation giving declined by 2 percent the first year of the crisis (and when the spending of the largest foundations fell even more steeply), there is evidence that foundations have performed this function during the pandemic (Lawrence 2008).[71] At first, it was a handful of small, progressive foundations that made public commitments to significantly increase payouts, even at the expense of their endowments. The CEO of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, which tripled its grantmaking in 2020, conceded that this would require sapping its approximately $180 million endowment by roughly $14 million and selling assets at a moment when the stock market was at a low point, but insisted that "when things are at their worst is when we need to lean in." She also appreciated the "storytelling" dimension of the increased payout, the narrative it would promote to other funders (one linked to the pandemic and to the movement for racial justice). Some of the largest foundations also pushed their payouts beyond levels from previous years, though none as dramatically as the smaller, family foundations. Even more broadly, there was a heightened sense that the needs of the present trumped philanthropy's traditional deference to donors' personal prerogatives. In April 2020, for instance, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation (the nation's largest community foundation), which sat at the center of debates about donor-advised funds and their lack of any payout requirement, called on their DAF holders to give 5 percent of their assets to a pandemic-related cause. The foundation's president considered this "transformative thinking," challenging the preexisting norms for community foundations to "meet the donors where they're at," which she embraced based on a belief that donors needed to meet their responsibilities to the moment.[72]

How widespread has the norm for increased spending during the pandemic been? When the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* surveyed the 25 largest foundations in April 2020, 5 had announced they would likely increase grantmaking that year. By September, a survey of 250 foundations showed that 60 percent expected to spend more than their 2020 budget by an average of 17 percent. However, a survey of the 500 largest foundations conducted between May and August of that year found that only roughly one-third of foundations that reported establishing a new fund to address pandemic-related issues also reported increasing their payout percentage (Finchum-Mason, Husted, and Suárez 2020). These surveys suggest a substantial, if not fully dominant norm toward increased giving in response to the crisis. Indeed, it was strong enough that staff from Open Society Foundation issued a public rebuke of the foundation for failing to increase its grantmaking budget for the year.[73]

The norm was also strong enough to stoke policy advocacy to attempt to enforce it, with several campaigns initiated to mandate increased payouts during the crisis (and, for some, after it). In May

2020, a campaign called "Emergency Charity Stimulus" called on Congress to double the required foundation payout rate from 5 to 10 percent over the next three years (and to apply it to DAFs). "In the midst of global pandemic and economic shutdown, there is no justification for allowing the country's wealthiest dynasties to hoard tax-advantaged funds that have already been designated as charitable contributions in anticipation of some future need, when there are so many urgent needs now," it declared. In December 2020, philanthropist John Arnold and law professor Ray Madoff launched the Initiative to Accelerate Charitable Giving, which called on Congress to "support reforms to charitable giving laws to ensure that funds set aside for charitable giving reach those in need in a timely way." These included restrictions on what could be counted toward foundation payouts and policies incentivizing time limits for DAFs. This represented an attempt, as Arnold explained, to upend "the slow-moving philanthropic status quo." Indeed, foundations had long resisted these sorts of reforms, but in what was a clear signal that philanthropic norms had begun to shift, the initiative received support from several leading foundations, including Ford, Kellogg, and Kresge.[74]

The other time-based norm that has emerged alongside the promotion of spending *more* philanthropic funds favors disbursing those funds quickly. The COVID-19 crisis sparked the proliferation of scores of "rapid-response funds" across the country, attracting both large- and smaller-scale donations. Many of these funds featured a dramatically pared down application process, to channel money to nonprofits as expeditiously as possible. During the pandemic, several individual megadonors have adopted a similar approach, leaning on a minimalist bureaucracy and a trust-based philanthropy philosophy that explicitly prioritizes getting money out the door as quickly as possible. Most impressively, Scott disbursed some $4.15 billion in just four months, likely the most money distributed to charities by a single individual in such a short period. Similarly, in April 2020, Dorsey announced he would give away $1 billion (a third of his fortune) for coronavirus relief efforts. "Why now? The needs are increasingly urgent, and I want to see the impact in my lifetime," Dorsey announced in a tweet. This was, as one analyst explained, a repudiation of the "earn now, figure out the giving later" approach. The head of one Dorsey grantee described the grant process, which involved just a single phone conversation: "Within a few hours, we had an answer. And within a few days, the money was in the account," he recalled. "I've never seen anything like this."[75]

The norm toward timely giving has also been reinforced by the protests against racial violence. The relationship between the norm-setting during these two crises is worth noting; as the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reported, leaders of the Movement for Black Lives pointed to philanthropy's quick response to the COVID-19 crisis as proof that the sector could revise its temporal orientation in the face of a collective sense of urgency. What was required was an understanding of racial injustice as a crisis as profound as any pandemic.[76]

This call for a norm of timeliness to meet a crisis of racial injustice and racist violence proceeded on several dimensions, and it was amplified by the surge of smaller-scale donations that swelled bail funds and mutual aid relief funds across the country. Like the demands for a timely philanthropic response to the coronavirus pandemic, activists pushed funders to stop warehousing financial resources to meet future needs and instead apply them to the current crisis, and they urged that those funds be moved rapidly into the hands of people and groups leading movements for racial justice. These calls also focused on the racialized politics of philanthropic time frames, a perspective that has often been neglected in broader debates about the legitimacy of endowments and the contests between present and future needs. The decisions about philanthropic spending that reflect and inform temporal norms are dominated by white men, who disproportionately hold philanthropic wealth, sit on foundation boards, and manage foundation investments. Activists have argued that an ethic of timeliness that places a premium on spending now rather than later and puts additional resources in the hands of grantees is therefore also a way to contend with deep power imbalances in the sector. As California nonprofit leader Christina Livingston has declared, philanthropic leaders who seek to promote racial justice must "unlock endowments and let those who bear the brunt of generations of systemic racial and economic violence determine how those resources can best serve."[77]

These time-based giving norms that have developed during the pandemic foster a certain set of giving narratives (even as they are, in turn, fed by them). Perhaps the most prominent involves the idiom of saving for a rainy day. "If there's a time to dig deeper in our endowments, this is it," declared the president of the Jewish Funders Network. "This IS the rainy day we've been saving for." "It is a rainy day. It is raining. And now is the time to give it away," the chief philanthropy officer at the Boston Foundation told *Nonprofit Quarterly*. The rainy day narrative evokes a past period of responsible thrift and prudence that is interrupted by an emergency, one that should have been planned for and which demands an immediate response. At its heart, this narrative most often involves an interruption, as opposed to a repudiation, of preexisting norms. Rain showers end and when they do, previous practices can be reestablished, even as future storms are anticipated.[78]

Although the rainy day narrative provides a powerful call for spending in the moment, it does not necessarily question the fundamental legitimacy of endowments, though depending on the size of the coming "storm," it could justify their liquidation. In other words, the narrative provides a way to honor the urgency of the moment while maintaining a commitment to future needs. In a sense, then, it represents the rhetorical equivalent of the rationales behind the "social justice bonds" that numerous leading foundations have promoted and that allowed them to significantly increase their payout during the pandemic and in response to the protests for racial justice by issuing debt (at historically low rates) instead of liquidating assets. "For most foundations, the idea of taking on debt is outside of normative thinking," the Ford Foundation's Darren Walker wrote to his board introducing the idea. "Covid-19 has created unprecedented challenges that require foundations to consider ideas—even radical ones that would have never been considered in the past." Walker promoted the plan to other funders. "Our ordinary practice is to annually pay out in the range of 5 percent of the value of our endowments, the legal minimum," he explained in a *Chronicle of Philanthropy* op-ed. "But this is no ordinary time. We cannot do the minimum when faced with the overwhelming threat to the survival of nonprofits and, by extension, our democracy." But Walker did not exhort other foundation leaders to dip into the corpus of their investments. The decision to sell bonds to raise funds to meet current crises, explained *Nonprofit Quarterly's* Steve Dubb, "enable[d] philanthropy to have its endowment cake and eat it too" (although these bonds, as Larry Kramer notes, by no means allow foundations to "escape…the present versus future tradeoff").[79]

Giving Norms and Narratives in a Postpandemic World

Walker's invocation of "unprecedented challenges," much like the narrative of the rainy day and the norms of timeliness it invoked, left the status of the norms and narratives that would eventually govern "ordinary times" undefined. It did not signal the more substantial recalibration of philanthropy's temporal responsibility reflected, for instance, in the decisions of some foundations to increase current spending at the immediate expense of the endowment and future needs.[80] Thus we are left to consider the longer-term legacy of the time-based narratives and norms that have arisen in response to the pandemic. It seems likely that the norm insisting that institutional and individual funders consider timeliness as an analytic category will persist after the pandemic. There has been more discussion about the ethics of payout, about the relationship between funders' responsibilities to the present and to the future, and about how funders can express their values through the speed with which funds are disbursed, than at any other time in half a century. Timeliness now saturates discourse surrounding philanthropy; these issues are, as one leading nonprofit-sector publication has put it, increasingly "up for debate." Out of these debates, timeliness as an affirmative ethic has been actively promoted. But this has also meant that perpetuity has been more explicitly defended than at any time in recent memory, as has philanthropy's responsibility to the future more generally. It will be difficult to fully rein in these debates or to mothball discussion of these issues even when they are no longer fueled by the urgency of the pandemic.

But if the *discussions* persist, that does not necessarily mean that an affirmative norm that favors giving in the present will. In other words, it is not clear whether the time-based norms of giving forged during the pandemic are unique to it or actually transformational in a way that will reshape attitudes and expectations after this crisis. That question hinges on a larger one: Are these crises and the giving norms that have governed them temporary interruptions to the status quo, or do they represent a permanent break, inaugurating what Ryan Schlegel has called a "new normal" whereby givers acknowledge the deep injustices afflicting our social, environmental, and economic systems and adapt their giving accordingly? The fate of these norms will depend on who has and who wields the power to define and delimit what constitutes a crisis after the pandemic ends.[81]

This dynamic will also shape the longer-term status of the pandemic-related narratives surrounding everyday giving and their relationship to large-scale donations. It is possible that the institutions, organizations, and practices these narratives have developed around will maintain their momentum and take on new life to meet new challenges on the other side of the pandemic "portal." Though it is unlikely, given economic trends, that we will see a dramatic decline in large-scale philanthropy in the near future, it is possible that the attention directed toward (and the hope invested in) smaller-scale forms of individual and collective generosity will continue to provide a narrative counterweight.

There are, however, already signs that this more affirming narrative is weakening. At the end of 2020, even as the media cast a spotlight on the impressive figures coming out of "Giving Season," there was a proliferation of stories about the overwhelming need faced by charities across the nation and the insufficiency of the contributions they had received. As the Associated Press noted in December 2020, "The American spirit of generosity this holiday season may be no match for the coronavirus." Notes of disillusionment have also increasingly entered public assessments of the state of Americans' generosity, given the resistance of many citizens to adopt relatively simple public health measures that could restrict the spread of the virus. "Americans used to sacrifice for the public good. What happened?" two history professors asked in December 2020 in the *Washington Post*. Moreover, reports on how crowdfunding was essential to supporting the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, providing transportation and lodging funds for many participants, have underscored the darker, "uncivil" elements of the American tradition of voluntarism that the sense of crisis can precipitate.[82]

Although these more pessimistic narratives are unlikely to eclipse the more hopeful ones, it is also unlikely they will entirely disappear. After the pandemic, it is possible that no single narrative will emerge out of the expression of American voluntarism as vigorously as the narrative celebrating small-scale generosity emerged during the first months of the pandemic. There will almost certainly be a mess of narratives fueled by people's shared and differing experiences of the pandemic, which will mean all the more work for anyone who wants to promote any particular one.

Notes

[1] This report uses the term “giving norms and narratives” to refer to both the norms and narratives that apply to smaller-scale charity and to larger-scale philanthropy.

[2] Arundhati Roy, “The pandemic is a portal,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020; Alex Daniels, “Soros’s Open Society Employees Rebuke Management for Redirected Funds,” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 29, 2020; Ryan Schlegel, “This is No Fleeting Crisis—It’s the New Normal. Are Foundations Ready to Get Serious?” *Inside Philanthropy*, October 21, 2020.

[3] This report does not, for instance, fully engage emerging norms around adopting a racial equity lens in grantmaking. For an example of research that has engaged those norms, see Ryan Schlegel and Anna Koob’s “COVID-19 philanthropy and 4 big questions for 2021.”

[4] Jonathan Ponciano, “The Countries with the Most Billionaires,” *Forbes*, April 8, 2020.

[5] It is worth following more closely whether the norms shaping large-scale giving in the direction of more public discussion of philanthropy has an effect on small- and medium-scale donors.

[6] Elon Musk’s development as a philanthropist, and as one of the world’s wealthiest individuals, will provide a strong public test of these norms. See Theodore Schleifer, “The big decision before Elon Musk, now the richest person in the world,” Vox/Recode, January 11, 2021; Andrew Ross Sorkin, “The Mystery of Steve Jobs’s Public Giving,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2011.

[7] Vindu Goel and Nick Wingfield, “Mark Zuckerberg Vows to Donate 99% of His Facebook Shares to Charity,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2015; Michael R. Bloomberg, “Why I’m Giving $1.8 Billion for College Financial Aid,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2018.

[8] Perhaps the best example of this dynamic is provided by Atlantic Philanthropies founder Chuck Feeney, who in his first decades as a philanthropist upheld a strict commitment to anonymity but abandoned it to become the leading public champion of “giving while living.” See O’Clery (2007) and Soskis (2017, 34–39); Marc Gunther, “Has the Giving Pledge Changed Giving?” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 4, 2019; Theodore Schleifer, “Larry Ellison, one of the world’s richest people, asks for a second chance at charity,” Vox, August 24, 2020.

[9] Dorsey has embraced what might be called a norm of “discrete transparency,” whereby he publicly shares where his money is going but offers little about the process or thinking behind how he arrives at those decisions. Similarly, after becoming, for a brief period, the wealthiest person in the world, Elon Musk began publicly announcing his donations, though offered few details about his future philanthropic program. Owen Thomas, “Suddenly, Jack Dorsey is talking about his charitable giving,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 30, 2019; Sorkin, “The Mystery of Steve Jobs’s Public Giving”; Theodore Schleifer, “Inside Jack Dorsey’s radical experiment for billionaires to give away their money,” Vox, June 11, 2020; Jack Dorsey (@jack), Twitter, April 7, 2020, 4:04 p.m., https://twitter.com/jack/status/1247616216887255042.

[10] These narratives frequently involve a select set of charities, elite institutions with already oversized endowments or contribution bases, with which donors are often personally connected. Marc Gunter, “Rich charities keep getting richer. That means your money isn’t doing as much good as it could,” Vox, April 24, 2017

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[12] David Gelles, “Laurene Powell Jobs Is Putting Her Own Dent in the Universe,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2020; Benjamin Soskis, “The Importance of Criticizing Philanthropy,” *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2014.

[13] See, for example, Giridharadas (2018) and Villanueva (2018).

[14] See also more recent criticisms of Zuckerberg's philanthropy to address election security, which have noted Facebook's role in disseminating misinformation. Theodore Schleifer, "Mark Zuckerberg's $300 million donation to protect elections must overcome Facebook's past," Vox, September 1, 2020; Anand Giridharadas, "When Your Money Is So Tainted Museums Don't Want It," *New York Times*, May 16, 2019; Patrick Radden Keefe, "The Family that Built an Empire of Pain," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2017; Ellen Barry, "Tufts Removes Sackler Name Over Opioids," *New York Times*, December 5, 2019.

[15] Shane Goldmacher, "Trump Foundation Will Dissolve," *New York Times*, December 18, 2018.

[16] Debi Ghate, "How We Value Charitable Contributions Matters," Philanthropy Roundtable, October 1, 2020.

[17] This challenge is heavily associated with effective altruism, but variations of it extend beyond that movement and inform critiques grounded in racial equity and other social justice frameworks. For a brief overview of effective altruism, see Peter Singer, "The Logic of Effective Altruism," Boston Review, July 1, 2015; Dylan Matthews, "For the love of God, rich people, stop giving Harvard money," Vox, June 3, 2015.

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[19] Benjamin Soskis, "George Soros and the Demonization of Philanthropy," *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2017. See also Ettling (1981, 130), Zunz (2011, 193–196), and Tamkin (2020).

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[22] Cutlip (1965, 69), Zunz (2011, 176, 246), and O'Neill (1989, 10).

[23] Patrick M. Rooney, "Where Have All the Donors Gone? The Continued Decline of the Small Donor and the Growth of Megadonors," Nonprofit Quarterly, December 4, 2019.

[24] Rooney, "Where have All the Donors Gone?"; Amy Schiller, "What happens when only rich people give to charity?" *Washington Post*, December 3, 2019; see also Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (2019) and Colinvaux (2017).

[25] For one statement on how a critical focus on elite giving is eclipsing the health of smaller-scale giving, see Zinsmeister, "The War on Philanthropy." "Today's critics of private giving are most misleading in their suggestion that it is primarily a game played by 'the billionaire boys' club,'" he writes. "The lion's share of America's vast philanthropy comes from ordinary citizens." See also Rooney, "Where Have All the Donors Gone?"

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