

COLUMNS

Opinion/Brulle: DonorsTrust supports plutocracy, not democracy

By Robert J. Brulle



Rhode Island Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse is known for his exposure of the dark side of the conservative movement and how dark money is affecting everything from climate policy to judicial appointments. During the recent confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett, Senator Whitehouse detailed how DonorsTrust, one dark-money operation, is a primary funder of the conservative agenda.

What is DonorsTrust and is Whitehouse's claim that the fund serves as an "identity scrubbing machine for the right wing" accurate? The president and CEO of DonorsTrust disputes this charge ("No, Senator, DAFs promote philanthropic freedom," Commentary, Nov. 24), claiming they are just like any other philanthropic institution. Let's look at the facts.

According to the [2018 tax return](#) of DonorsTrust, the organization took in a total of \$198 million in donations. The Foundation Grants Directory reports that \$22 million of that income came from 36 foundations. Another \$176 million came from 11 individuals, including one contribution of nearly \$124 million, or 62% of the total income of the organization for that year. In total, 89% of its income came from unknown givers. In other words, a few anonymous millionaires and billionaires provide the overwhelming amount of funding to DonorsTrust.

Where does this money go? DonorsTrust gave out \$142 million in grants to 374 organizations. Some went to traditional charitable organizations, such as churches and summer camps. However, the vast majority of funds went to support conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations.

Nearly \$7 million went to the Judicial Education Project, which advocates for conservative judicial appointments. This represents 89% of the total income of this organization. Another \$6 million went to the Federalist Society, another organization advocating for conservative judicial

philosophy — 26% of the income of that organization. Both of these nonprofit organizations were heavily involved in the campaigns to nominate judges Brett Kavanaugh and Coney Barrett to the U.S. Supreme Court.

And \$2.9 million went to the Heartland Institute, which disputes the veracity of climate science — 50% of the income of the organization. The pattern of giving is quite clear: in [my analysis of the funding of organized efforts to oppose climate action](#), DonorsTrust provided 24% of the funding for the organizations.

Giving through DonorsTrust allows individuals to disguise their identity. A Greenpeace operation in 2015 showed that operatives for a conservative think tank [suggested routing funding through DonorsTrust](#) to preserve anonymity. A second investigation by a German newspaper showed that the [Heartland Institute recommended funneling cash to them via DonorsTrust](#).

So what does this tell us about DonorsTrust? It is funded by a few anonymous individuals capable of making multimillion-dollar donations. Its funding goes to a large network of conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations. Investigative reporting has shown that there are instances using DonorsTrust to conceal the identity of funders.

Is it an identity-scrubbing machine for the right wing? Well, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.

Dark money undermines our democracy. Organizations such as DonorsTrust enable anonymous wealthy individuals to exert an undue level of influence on the political process. Rather than public policy being based on the equal competition of ideas in the public sphere, this sort of funding of particular viewpoints enables one speaker to have a massive megaphone, drowning out other voices. There is a word for this sort of political system — plutocracy.

We require lobbyists to disclose their financial payments and who they are lobbying for. We require public reporting of political contributions. Yet when it comes to supporting advocacy organizations, funding schemes such as DonorsTrust continue to allow the rich to exercise political power without accountability.

We need a revision of our regulation of the nonprofit sector. The vast sums flowing through our political system have a major impact on the decisions it makes that impact our lives. We need accountability and openness to restore democratic control over our institutions.

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