The Bridgespan Group

Slow Philanthropy

Why giving by the ultra-wealthy often lags behind their ambitions—and what could help move money faster

An essay by

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Acknowledgments

This essay is built on 25 years of Bridgespan's experience working with philanthropists and nonprofits. We have always described Bridgespan as an act of co-creation, a phrase that also describes this essay. The data, insights, and examples come from colleagues across Bridgespan, although I take full responsibility for errors of commission or omission. I'm deeply grateful to the colleagues who have been especially helpful in its development: Betsy Doyle, Michael Etzel, Preeta Nayak, Sonali Patel, Alison Powell, Lyell Sakaue, Nidhi Sahni, and Tom Tierney. Special thanks to Gail Perreault, who has been an editorial and thought partner throughout the writing process.

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Foreword

Over the past few years, when people have asked me about Bridgespan's strategy as it relates to philanthropy, I invariably conclude with some version of: "When you step back, the meta-question we are always grappling with is: how do you help and motivate philanthropists to give more?" When my conversation partner inevitably follows up with, "What is the answer?", I offer a word salad sprinkled with (I hope) a few interesting observations, and end by saying, "I'm humbled by how hard it is to change giving patterns in philanthropy."

What makes this question difficult is that philanthropy is deeply personal and voluntary. The old saw that "if you know one foundation, you know one foundation" applies even more to ultra-wealthy individuals. Personal beliefs, values, faith traditions, cultural identities, family dynamics, as well as the structure and liquidity of a person's wealth, each can affect whether, how, and how much a person gives. While these factors provide important context, they are difficult to influence directly and are not the primary focus of this essay. Instead, I focus here on understanding the assumptions, norms, structures, and initiatives that shape a person's philanthropy and that may be amenable to change in ways that unlock greater giving.

This topic has grown in importance as the wealth of this small group has soared and as questions intensify about how society's most important opportunities and challenges will be addressed. Recent shifts in government funding flows have only heightened the stakes.

Philanthropy has been a focus for The Bridgespan Group since our founding 25 years ago as a nonprofit organization (half of Bridgespan's client work is with nonprofits and half with funders). For our first 15 years, those efforts centered largely on how to "give smart," as my co-founder Tom Tierney put it in the title of his 2011 book with Joel Fleishman. Over the past decade, another crucial question has emerged: how to unlock "greater giving" among the ultra-wealthy. (In 2018, we captured our thinking on this question in *Four Pathways to Greater Giving*.)

While there has been some encouraging progress, I am still humbled by how little we understand about what it will take to realize more giving, even among people committed to giving away a large share of their wealth. This essay reflects on a range of efforts to accelerate philanthropy among major US donors, examining where those efforts stand and what we can learn from them. Based on conversations sparked by early drafts, I'm sure people will interpret the evidence and examples in the pages that follow in different ways—and may even disagree about whether philanthropy is "slow" at all. That is okay. This is not an attempt to offer THE answer, but rather to lift up signals—some weak, some strong—as we collectively try to make sense of what is happening.

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Introduction

One of the most striking stories of this era is the massive accumulation of wealth among the very few. The wealth held by the richest 0.1 percent of Americans now exceeds the GDP of every country in the world except two (China and the United States). Since 2010, this group's share of the nation's wealth has grown by more than 35 percent, rising from 10.6 percent to 14.4 percent of total wealth. In 2024 alone, the wealth of the richest 19 US households increased by $1 trillion. And the anticipated wave of wealth from the IPOs of generative AI companies will further widen this gap.

For a while, it looked like an accompanying story would be the unlocking of commensurate large-scale philanthropy. Indeed, nearly 18 years ago, the book *Philanthrocapitalism: How Giving Can Save the World*, by *Economist* editors Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, heralded its arrival. In 2010, Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates, and Warren Buffett launched the Giving Pledge, and scores of billionaires pledged to channel at least half their wealth into philanthropy.

But that is not what has happened so far. Among US households with $500 million or more in assets, annual giving has held steady at 1.2 percent of their assets. To be clear, given the rapid pace of wealth accumulation, a flat rate still means giving by this group has increased significantly. Yet, that growth has also left a massive gap between their giving to date and the long-term philanthropic ambitions many hold. A decade after *Philanthrocapitalism* was published, another book captured a very different sentiment: *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, by Anand Giridharadas.

About half of the nation's roughly one thousand billionaires are 70 or older, so a great deal of money will soon flow somewhere. But it feels less certain today than it did 18 years ago that this wealth will ultimately flow into philanthropy. Furthermore, while some commentators anticipate a "third wave" of philanthropy with the emergence of new billionaires and even trillionaires riding the AI boom, those hopes may be dashed if philanthropy continues on its current trajectory.

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This essay explores what I call "slow philanthropy"—a pattern in which giving by the ultra-rich lags far behind the ambitions *they express*. While important innovations are helping philanthropy move faster in some respects, overall flows remain modest relative to the scale of resources and expressed intent. Drawing on decades of experience working with philanthropists on their giving strategies and research (including several studies from The Bridgespan Group), I reflect on a set of societal and donor-level frictions that influence philanthropic behavior in ways that are not always fully visible, even to those experiencing them.

My aim here is not to advance a particular set of recommendations, but to explore the underlying dynamics that keep capital from moving at greater scale and with greater speed. Until we better understand what is holding philanthropy back, we won't make meaningful progress in helping people bring their giving more fully in line with their highest aspirations. This gap between aspiration and action is consequential not only for philanthropy and its lofty potential but also, importantly, for the people and organizations whose work strengthens communities, expands opportunity, and improves lives.

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Efforts to Speed Up Giving to Date

The tremendous wealth created by the dot-com boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, along with the rapid growth of private equity and hedge funds, helped launch a new generation of philanthropy, marked by the creation of numerous foundations, including The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (now the Gates Foundation), Omidyar Foundation (later the Omidyar Network), the Dalio Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and the Robertson Foundation. Over the next two decades, a range of efforts emerged to accelerate giving among the newly wealthy, including attempts to reshape philanthropic norms, build new intermediaries, create quasi-market mechanisms to connect capital with opportunities, and establish new philanthropic vehicles and structures.[1]

Giving norms

The most visible effort to influence giving norms has been the Giving Pledge. Launched in 2010, the Pledge invited billionaires to commit to devoting at least half of their wealth to philanthropy, either during their lifetimes or upon their passing. It sought to establish philanthropy as an important responsibility of the wealthy, echoing Andrew Carnegie's intent when he published *The Gospel of Wealth* in 1889. Not insignificantly, the Pledge also conferred recognition on participants for their stated philanthropic intentions.

1 Over the past 25 years, The Bridgespan Group has had the privilege of working alongside many of the philanthropists, foundations, collaborative funds, and nonprofit organizations referenced in this essay. Some of the individuals and organizations mentioned are current or former Bridgespan clients. The perspectives offered here are informed by that experience.

Roughly 200 of the wealthiest Americans have signed the Giving Pledge. Sixteen years on, the results are mixed. Recent research by the Institute for Policy Studies finds that fewer than half of deceased Pledgers met the Pledge's threshold. It also finds that, among living Pledgers, few appear to be on a trajectory to reach it, and only one family—Laura and John Arnold—has done so to date.[2] That said, most Pledgers are still alive and have time to act. As a voluntary, non-binding commitment, the Pledge allows for wide variation in how and when those intentions are fulfilled—and whether they are fulfilled at all.

At the same time, there are signs that the Pledge's momentum may be shifting. The pace of new signatories has slowed in recent years, and a small number of participants have stepped away from or revised their commitments. Meanwhile, some prominent technology leaders, including Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and Jeff Bezos, have advanced a different view, arguing that building transformative companies can itself constitute a form of philanthropy—implicitly challenging the Pledge's core premise that wealth should ultimately be redirected through charitable giving.

Of course, many signatories may have given similar amounts regardless of the Pledge, while some non-signers—such as the co-founders of AI company Anthropic—also intend to give most of their wealth away. Still, the Giving Pledge has helped bring the philanthropy of the ultra-rich out of the shadows and prompted more open conversation about philanthropic intentions.

Collaborative efforts

Alongside efforts to shape norms, the wealth boom around 2000 spurred the creation of new institutions designed to support donors directly and make giving easier. Collaborative philanthropic efforts

2 Available data on the giving of Giving Pledge signatories has important limitations. Outcomes for deceased Pledgers are difficult to assess, given the limited public information on estates and bequests. Assessments of living Pledgers' progress toward fulfilling the Pledge may also under-capture firm commitments not yet reflected in disbursed funds, such as multiyear grant commitments that have not been fully paid out or charitable provisions in estate plans.

like New Profit and NewSchools Venture Fund emerged during this period, sowing the seeds for a new category of philanthropic actor: collaborative funds. Rather than building their own teams, donors could leverage shared expertise and access vetted, high-quality opportunities for impact across a wide array of fields. Donors cite several benefits to participating in collaborative funds, including expanding the pool of strong organizations to support, aggregating capital to enable larger grants, accessing expertise and spreading its costs across multiple donors, and mitigating risk by giving as part of a group.

Blue Meridian Partners, launched in 2016, has since pooled contributions of more than $6 billion from over 20 philanthropic partners interested in increasing economic mobility in the United States. Similarly, since 2018, TED's Audacious Project has engaged more than 55 donor families, who together have helped to catalyze over $8.8 billion for a portfolio of 70 projects around the globe. These are two prominent examples among the more than 300 collaborative funds globally.

From our vantage point at Bridgespan, collaborative funds—most of which have sprung up in the past decade—have gone from a relatively niche model to a significant and increasingly diverse part of the philanthropic landscape. Having advised the founding teams of several of the largest collaboratives globally, we have observed growing interest in the model across a wide range of issue areas and donor communities.

The category has also evolved in a variety of directions. Established foundations have increasingly launched collaborative vehicles to mobilize capital beyond their own endowments. Other organizations, such as Renaissance Philanthropy, have combined collaborative funds with donor advisory services. Similarly, Coefficient Giving, formerly known as Open Philanthropy, began as the primary philanthropic vehicle of Cari Tuna and Dustin Moskovitz but has expanded in recent years to advise other donors and offer funds open to outside participation. Collaborative giving has also taken root within preexisting networks of wealthy individuals, including ICONIQ Impact (built on the multifamily wealth management firm ICONIQ Capital) and Stand Together (founded by Charles Koch and built initially on a network of political donors).

A mix of factors explains collaborative funds' ability to unlock capital. Their rigorous sourcing and vetting processes surely help build donors' confidence in prospective grantees. But the social dynamics among peers may matter just as much. When donors consider opportunities together, the presence—and endorsement—of trusted peers can catalyze commitments beyond what a rigorous due diligence report can produce.

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While an important addition to the philanthropic landscape, collaborative fund launches may be slowing according to recent research (though this does not necessarily indicate that overall giving to collaboratives is slowing). For now, collaborative funds remain a relatively modest share of most philanthropic portfolios.

Philanthropic advising

As the collaborative ecosystem developed, so did the philanthropy-advising space. In the early 2000s, a new set of advisory firms—including Bridgespan, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Foundation Strategy Group, Arabella Advisors, and Redstone Strategy Group—emerged, each seeking to bring greater strategic insight, analytic rigor, and management discipline to philanthropic efforts in response to the wave of newly wealthy donors.[3]

Since then, the field of philanthropy advising has grown significantly. Newer entities, such as Climate Lead and Gates Philanthropy Partners, have entered the space. Renaissance Philanthropy, Coefficient Giving, and ICONIQ Impact all offer advisory services,

3 Since their founding, several of these firms have evolved organizationally. Foundation Strategy Group now operates as FSG. Redstone Strategy Group was acquired by Arabella in 2023. Following Arabella's 2025 restructuring, its advisory practice continues through Vital Impact and now specifically through ViaNova.

underscoring the increasingly blurred boundaries between collaborative giving and philanthropy advising. At the same time, private wealth management firms and multifamily offices are making philanthropy a more prominent part of their offerings and dedicating staff to support it, with ICONIQ Impact and UBS providing notable examples. Platforms such as P150 point to a burgeoning industry of individual advisors and boutique firms (over 1,400 people now have "philanthropic advisor" or "philanthropy advisor" as their LinkedIn title).

Advisors can provide expertise, confidence, and practical support, helping donors move from intention to action. At the same time, an emphasis on "business discipline" and process—which may or may not be linked to results—can create additional friction. Advisors' incentives may also matter, particularly because they can vary significantly depending on whether an advisor operates as a nonprofit or a for-profit entity. The incentives of the wealth management industry, and their potential effects on giving, are explored later in this essay.

A new model has emerged in which sponsoring philanthropists fund advisory services for other donors. The advisory services of Climate Lead and Coefficient Giving are funded by philanthropists seeking to direct more capital toward specific issues (e.g., climate) or approaches (e.g., effective altruism), allowing participating donors to access support at no additional charge. "We need a Climate Lead for our issue" has become an increasingly common refrain among leaders in other fields, a sign of the model's appeal, though it remains an open question how readily it translates across different issue areas and conditions.

Philanthropic marketplaces

Alongside efforts to support donors directly, some innovators sought to build a broader "market" for philanthropic opportunities. These efforts aim to make it simpler and faster for donors to find opportunities aligned with their interests, often borrowing ideas from the for-profit capital market. In both sectors, the core challenge is similar: matching people with capital to people who have initiatives and ideas that need capital, while accounting for a wide range of preferences on both sides of the market. In the for-profit world, this matching process operates with stunning efficiency, speed, and scale through a wide range of institutions. The social sector has not seen a similar evolution.

While market platforms such as Kiva, DonorsChoose, GlobalGiving, and GoFundMe now successfully connect "everyday donors" to opportunities across a wide range of fields, efforts to build a more structured philanthropic capital market for ultra-wealthy donors have gained only modest traction. One indicator of the challenge is the Hewlett Foundation's Nonprofit Marketplace Initiative, launched in 2006. Eight years later, Hewlett wound down the initiative, concluding it had limited impact on increasing the supply and demand for the kinds of information about nonprofits that might catalyze greater giving among the wealthy. One finding was that external, general evidence did not seem to move donors' behavior; they wanted to do their own research and make their own decisions.

Even so, glimmers of more market-like dynamics have appeared in other efforts focused on the ultra-wealthy. Lever for Change, for example, hosts open-call competitions on behalf of funders seeking to surface high-quality potential grantees. While the winner receives direct funding from the sponsoring donor, all finalists become part of Lever's Bold Solution Network (BSN). Lever reports having influenced more than $2.6 billion in funding to over 500 organizations, with 40 percent of that funding flowing after organizations join the BSN—once the competitions have concluded and the winners have been selected. Similarly, while Giving Compass reaches donors across wealth levels, there is also evidence that it is influencing giving. It is not clear what drives these effects—whether exposure to new organizations, confidence generated by vetting and curation processes, or some combination of these factors. Either way, these examples suggest that there may be relatively low-cost ways to provide donors with "deal flow" that boosts giving.

Another notable example comes from the effective altruism movement. GiveWell conducts research to identify the interventions that save the most lives per dollar invested. It curates a short list of organizations it believes offer a high social return on investment.

Donors can either donate through GiveWell (which then regrants the funds) or give directly to the featured organizations. GiveWell reports that over 125,000 donors have directed over $2.6 billion to charities over the past 15 years, although more than half of that total has come from Cari Tuna and Dustin Moskovitz through Open Philanthropy (now Coefficient Giving). While its size is meaningful—and there is now talk about how the boom in AI wealth might be directed to this approach to giving—it is striking that a movement explicitly designed to reduce uncertainty, identify high-impact opportunities, and increase donor confidence has not spread even faster among the ultra-wealthy, reflecting, at least in part, how difficult it can be to accelerate large-scale giving.

Vehicles and structures

Alongside broader efforts to accelerate giving, donors are using a wider array of structures to hold and deploy their philanthropic capital. The vast majority (76 percent) of the *Forbes* Top 25 Givers in America now use multiple philanthropic vehicles rather than relying on a foundation alone. At least 40 percent have established philanthropic LLCs, nearly all within the past decade. The rapid growth of family offices—which manage the wealth and assets of ultra-wealthy families—has been accompanied by the addition of philanthropic advisors to many of those teams. Donor-advised funds (DAFs), explored in more detail later in this essay, have likewise surged in use. Taken together, these shifts point to a more varied and flexible philanthropic toolkit. Whether they ultimately lubricate the flow of philanthropic capital or create new friction remains an open question.

Mixed results

The fact remains that, while philanthropy has increased in absolute terms, it has not increased at a pace commensurate with the extraordinary growth in private wealth or the philanthropic ambitions many donors express. As noted earlier, among US households with more than $500 million in assets, annual giving in 2023 remained roughly flat as a share of wealth relative to 2017, even as the dollar value of that giving climbed significantly alongside rising fortunes.

The *Chronicle of Philanthropy*'s database of large US gifts reflects a similarly mixed picture. Across all sectors, the annual number and value of publicly reported "big bets" (gifts of $10 million or more) rose modestly over the past decade, with MacKenzie Scott accounting for a significant share of that growth. Yet outside higher education and Scott's giving, both the number and value of such gifts declined slightly.[4] This distinction matters. Bridgespan research on big bets found that although a large majority of major donors publicly express social change aspirations, such as reducing disparities in health care or addressing climate change, roughly 80 percent of the largest philanthropic commitments have historically flowed to universities, hospitals, and other major institutions rather than to efforts focused squarely on social change. These institutions play indispensable roles in society and are worthy recipients of philanthropic support. (And the recent federal funding cuts to universities and increased scrutiny illustrate that urgent philanthropic needs can arise in any corner.) Still, the gap between donors' stated aspirations and where large gifts ultimately flow is notable. This suggests that the frictions explored throughout this essay may be especially pronounced outside these longstanding philanthropic destinations.

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In September 2025, *Fortune* reported that US billionaires were worth $5.7 trillion and had pledged or donated only $185 billion of that amount over the prior decade. At the current pace, most of that

4 Based on the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*'s database of publicly reported US gifts of $10 million or more. To reduce sensitivity to endpoint selection, this analysis compares three-year averages for 2015–2017 versus 2023–2025. Including all gifts, the annual number of such gifts increased by 13 percent and the value by 18 percent. Excluding MacKenzie Scott's gifts, the number of gifts increased by 3 percent and the total value by 11 percent. Excluding both Scott's gifts and gifts to higher education, the number of gifts declined by 6 percent, and the total value declined by 14 percent.

wealth will remain within families, passing from one generation to the next. To date, the mix of moral suasion, stronger supporting institutions, and quasi-market mechanisms appears to be producing meaningful but still limited shifts in giving among the ultra-wealthy.

Across these efforts, a pattern emerges: well-designed interventions have made philanthropy easier and helped move money, but they have not fundamentally shifted the pace of major giving. That suggests the frictions that slow philanthropy may lie deeper—in the assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors that shape how donors experience the act of giving itself. To understand what is really holding philanthropy back, we need to look there.

2

What Adds Friction to Philanthropy?

One obvious interpretation of slow philanthropy is that philanthropists don't truly want to give away their money. As Giridharadas's book title suggests, perhaps the expressed desire to give is merely an elite charade—a public-relations exercise that masks an intention to keep wealth within families. Consciously or unconsciously, donors may search for seemingly "rational" reasons not to give—reasons that serve as a smokescreen for a deeper reluctance to part with their wealth. After reading about barriers to greater giving in a Bridgespan report, a thoughtful observer of the philanthropy field complimented my colleagues on the piece and then wondered whether we were making the issue too complicated: "If a billionaire gives away a lot of money, they will no longer be a billionaire. And all things being equal, they'd rather be a billionaire than not."

For some, this is surely part of the story. Yet when you speak privately with ultra-wealthy individuals about their giving or read the letters Pledgers write announcing their philanthropic intentions, many appear deeply committed to those aspirations. The large gap between aspiration and action suggests that something more complicated is at work: a mix of external headwinds and self-limiting beliefs and behaviors that together help explain why philanthropy moves more slowly than many expect.

Zooming out: External headwinds

Four contextual factors contribute to slow philanthropy. In some cases, these external headwinds may lead a philanthropist to explicitly decide to slow their giving. More often, their effects are subtler, adding friction to the process and resulting in hesitation, delay, or smaller commitments.

1. Philanthropy has overpromised and underdelivered

If the Bishop and Green book title captured this era's philanthropic ambition to "save the world," it is fair to say philanthropy has fallen short. The phrase may have been intended figuratively, yet much of the rhetoric that has infused philanthropy over the past two decades echoes this lofty aspiration. Phrases such as "transformative impact," "solving problems," and "population-level change" are common in the field. In a realm where major societal shifts, when they occur, take an average of 45 years, philanthropy too often overpromises and underdelivers because donors' expectations are misaligned with the pace of most social changes. Many donors understandably want to witness meaningful results during their own lifetimes, even though the kinds of change they seek often unfold across generations. Those inflated expectations breed disappointment, which in turn becomes a major source of friction in the giving process.

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I sometimes jokingly describe Bridgespan as a "dream killer" because we often guide people back to reality from overly wishful goals. But we, too, contributed to ways of thinking that set the bar impossibly high. For several years, we used a chart in discussions with philanthropists that laid out a continuum from "serving" to "solving." We would convey in myriad ways that serious philanthropy should aspire to the latter: the former was acceptable, but charity alone was unlikely to produce fundamental change. While this framing may have moved some people from the sidelines onto the philanthropy playing field—after all, inspiration is crucial to motivating people to give—the chickens do eventually come home to roost when donors confront just how hard it is to produce widespread change in the world. (Note: we no longer use this chart!)

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that most philanthropists we've worked with ask, somewhere around the 10-year mark of their journey, "Have I had any real impact?" For many, this question prompts a reset of expectations and a deepening humility about how change unfolds in the world: how long it takes and how many forces lie outside their sphere of influence. In many cases, that reckoning leads them to pull back, wind down initiatives to wind up others, and, at least for a while, reduce the flow of money to philanthropy.

2. Philanthropy is no longer automatically assumed to be virtuous

Over the past decade, philanthropy's moral standing has shifted. Widely read books, investigative reporting, and academic critiques have recast elite giving as something more complex than generosity alone. Giridharadas's *Winners Take All* brought long-standing concerns into the mainstream. Rob Reich, a Stanford professor and a leading scholar of philanthropy, captures the essence of the tension: "Big philanthropy is an exercise of power and in a democracy, power deserves scrutiny not just gratitude."

The underlying critique is not new. Philanthropy has long carried tensions over power, accountability, and legitimacy. What has changed is the visibility and reach of that critique. Since 2015, there has been a veritable explosion of academic treatises examining the relationship between philanthropy and democracy, often surfacing tensions and contradictions (including work by Reich, Claire Dunning, Megan Ming Francis, Kristin Goss, Linsey McGoey, Maribel Morey, Sarah Reckhow, Ben Soskis, and Megan E. Tompkins-Stange, among others). A higher level of scrutiny—both of one's philanthropy and the sources of one's wealth—now accompanies philanthropic efforts than in the recent past.

Criticism of philanthropy has been further amplified by growing concerns about widening wealth inequality—concerns that intensified in the wake of the Great Recession, shortly after the publication of *Philanthrocapitalism*. Darren Walker's book *From Generosity to Justice* lays out a philanthropic conundrum that feels more salient than ever: philanthropy is often built on fortunes whose creation contributes to the very problems philanthropy seeks to address.[5] This observation is not new, but it has gained currency in the current context and has cast a shadow over philanthropy—particularly when donors continue to operate or own businesses, such as Meta, Amazon, or Walmart.

Finally, and often close to home within their own organizations, some philanthropists have had to absorb intense criticism from staff about their privilege, sources of wealth, and gaps in racial awareness, especially in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and the ensuing so-called racial reckoning. While these criticisms may be warranted, in our work at Bridgespan we have seen some philanthropists feel alienated and, in some cases, pull back from giving. As one put it, "I've been working on issues of equality—now equity—for 20 years, and I'm told I know nothing and should not ask any questions." Importantly, this reaction is part of the broader "anti-woke" backlash that has reverberated through the United States over the past few years.

Philanthropy in America is a voluntary act. In a polarized environment, more confrontational public scrutiny—along with the personal security concerns that can accompany it, as I've heard philanthropists quietly acknowledge in private conversations—leads some to scale back what they might otherwise have done.

3. The wealth management industry emphasizes accumulation over giving

The recent explosion of wealth has been accompanied, unsurprisingly, by rapid growth in the wealth management industry. Barron's reports that assets managed by the nation's top 1,200 financial advisors have grown 135 percent over the past decade, reaching $6.1 trillion in 2025. At the same time, family offices have grown dramatically in both number and scale. Deloitte estimates that

5 For another influential critique of the relationship between wealth, power, and philanthropy, see Edgar Villanueva's *Decolonizing Wealth*.

more than 8,000 single-family offices now operate globally—about one-third more than five years prior—collectively managing $5.5 trillion in assets, an increase of roughly two-thirds over that period.

The dominant ethos of these entities is, of course, wealth preservation and accumulation, with philanthropy almost always a second-order priority (even as many of these institutions build teams of philanthropic advisors). They are largely led and staffed by people who have built careers in the financial services industry, and whose compensation and measures of success are anchored in assets under management. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the growth of these firms has not produced a corresponding surge in giving and may, in fact, complicate or slow donors' intention to give.

More subtly, but perhaps with no less effect, the trend toward blending charitable impulses with for-profit investing may further reinforce wealth management's dominant focus on accumulation. It is striking that the pitch for most impact investing funds centers on "market-rate returns with impact." While such investments may indeed create impact, the framing notably emphasizes preserving and growing capital (and raises questions about how much "additionality" they offer—that is, impact beyond what conventional investing would have produced). While this approach has helped put impact on the map within the investment industry and directed billions of dollars into impact-related enterprises, it also allows wealth managers to operate within their default paradigm of prioritizing wealth accumulation for their clients. Some among the ultra-wealthy are taking a different tack, as evidenced by the small but growing cadre of "impact-first" funds, but it is too early to tell whether they will gain broader traction.

4. Even among the wealthy, a sense of precarity is real

From the perspective of those living in the United States, the world today feels less safe and the future less certain than it has at any time in the past 50 years. The destabilizing effects of wealth inequality, climate change, artificial intelligence, declining trust in institutions, and increasing political polarization and instability are profoundly shaping how people experience the world. While precarity is experienced very differently depending on one's wealth, it now colors the life experiences of a broad swath of Americans. Half of Americans report that they couldn't cover three months of expenses if they lost their income, according to the Federal Reserve's Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking. Less intuitively, about 40 percent of Americans with over $1 million in assets report feeling financially insecure—a marked increase from just a few years ago.

While the wealthy, and certainly the ultra-wealthy, do not face an imminent financial crisis if conditions change, pervasive uncertainty nonetheless causes people to hunker down, wait and see, and act more cautiously. It may seem absurd that a billionaire feels any sense of precarity, but the simple fact is that some do. Many have seen fortunes rise and fall with market conditions or political shifts, and the speed of their giving can reflect their worries about the state of the world. Human psychology is intertwined in all this, too: when one's reference group is billionaires, having single-digit billions may feel like being "behind" those with double-digit billions.

Zooming in: Self-limiting beliefs and behaviors

It would be easy to assume that these external headwinds are temporary, or that the innovations discussed earlier will eventually hit their stride and that giving will take off. But that assumption rests on an implicit model of the philanthropist as a straightforward impact maximizer—someone who, with better tools and fewer barriers, will simply give more. What if that model is incomplete? What if the pace of giving is shaped as much by how wealthy people think about nonprofits and engage in philanthropy as by the external conditions around them?

Looking more closely at donors' decision making, a distinct set of beliefs and behaviors comes into view that also slows giving. These beliefs and behaviors animate much of how philanthropy operates, even though their origins are obscure and their effects are sometimes counterproductive. In practice, they add tremendous friction to donors' stated intention to give their money away.

Recent work has sought to deepen the understanding of donor psychology and address some of these issues directly. For example, a compelling report by the National Center for Family Philanthropy and ideas42 explores 10 psychological barriers to giving and offers a self-assessment tool and tactics for overcoming them.

But what if the barriers run deeper, rooted in conflicting motivations and beliefs that are not easily addressed by nudges, tools, or better information? One possibility is that these patterns function as rationalizations for not parting with one's wealth. Another possibility is that they stem from an inherent, unresolved tension between the attempt to apply a for-profit paradigm to philanthropy and the far more complex challenges of changing societies and people. Psychological dimensions may also be at work, as explored in the sidebar "The psychological shift from building wealth to giving it away" on page 28. Whatever the explanation, the result is the same: philanthropy remains slow—and the following four patterns help illuminate why.

1. "Failure" feels worse in philanthropy

One of the most consequential patterns concerns how philanthropists experience failure. In the for-profit world, failure is widely viewed as an integral part of entrepreneurship and business building. Sayings abound that echo "failure is the best teacher." Yet despite the frequent use of for-profit investment metaphors in thinking about philanthropy, this is one area where the analogy breaks down. An allergy to failure—or even to the perception of failure—animates philanthropy. Philanthropy may be extolled by theorists as "society's risk capital," but in practice, it is often treated as something more precious than business investment capital.

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A for-profit investor might celebrate a portfolio of 10 investments that had two "home runs," five average performers, and three underperformers, so long as the overall return is positive. Donors, by contrast, rarely think about their philanthropy this way. As one philanthropist put it, "I don't want my philanthropy to be wasted—to be for naught."

Part of this discomfort is understandable. In philanthropy, the cost of failure can be far higher than the loss of capital. Interventions affect real people and communities, and when they fall short, the consequences can include not only disappointment but also harm. Notably, however, this concern is rarely explicitly raised as a reason to slow or limit giving—even though it may operate implicitly in how donors assess risk.

The fear of failure adds friction to the giving process. It raises the bar that an organization or initiative must clear in a context where performance is far harder to define and measure than in the for-profit sector. Many of the outcomes philanthropists seek—say, a saved life or a child having greater agency—resist easy quantification of their value; efforts to calculate a clear "return" on these kinds of outcomes often stall. Meanwhile, "failure" in the social sector is rarely straightforward: a nonprofit may fall short of ambitious goals and still have produced meaningful good.

Fear of failure also makes donors hesitant to share what hasn't worked, cutting off learning that could reveal more compelling pathways to impact. When foundations periodically illuminate failures—such as the Gates Foundation with aspects of its US K-12 education work or the Kataly Foundation's recent series "The F Word"—they're often hailed for their courage. That reaction underscores how uncommon such transparency remains.

2. Concerns about inefficiency and waste take on outsized importance

Few donor instincts are as deeply ingrained—or as consequential—as concern about inefficiency and waste. Nowhere is this more evident than in the persistence of arbitrary, low overhead rates for nonprofits. Decades of campaigns aimed at helping donors see the self-defeating nature of these rules have had limited effect;

flexible and supportive approaches remain the exception rather than the norm. Despite mountains of evidence and repeated efforts to dismantle what has come to be known as the "starvation cycle," the practice stubbornly persists. It took a global pandemic—the imminent threat to nonprofit survival—to prompt even a relatively modest loosening of onerous grant terms.

At one level, this fear of waste reflects a basic distrust of nonprofits' ability to manage themselves. Even granting that concern, a puzzle remains. If donors worry that nonprofits lack the capacity to deliver results, why do they resist investing in that very capacity—through reasonable overhead, flexible funding, and longer-term commitments? Once again, despite frequent calls to run nonprofits more like businesses, this is yet another place where the analogy breaks down, and donor behavior appears to be guided by something else.

> *A mindset that assumes inefficiency and waste from the outset narrows the set of organizations deemed "fundable," reduces the size and duration of grants, and favors highly constrained commitments over sustained investment.*

The implications extend beyond effectiveness to the pace of giving itself. A mindset that assumes inefficiency and waste from the outset narrows the set of organizations deemed "fundable," reduces the size and duration of grants, and favors highly constrained commitments over sustained investment. These practices make it harder for nonprofits to flourish and to generate the kinds of compelling results that would justify larger or bolder bets. Over time, the dynamic becomes self-fulfilling: fewer strong success stories reinforce donor caution, further slowing the flow of philanthropic capital needed to produce success stories.

3. Decision rights are surprisingly hard to let go of

Given the fear of failure and concern about waste, many philanthropists hesitate to delegate decision rights over grantmaking.

It is not uncommon for major donors to require approval for expenditures as small as $10,000 or to insist on approving every grant. Even in settings where philanthropists have hired professional staff for their own foundations, the degree of hands-on involvement often exceeds what one sees on the investment side of the house and can feel puzzlingly out of proportion to the size of the money at stake.

This reluctance may stem, in part, from a lack of philanthropic intermediaries they trust—counterparts to private wealth advisors, private equity firms, or mutual funds in the for-profit sector. But the gap between what philanthropists say they want to do and how they actually behave runs deeper than that.

> *There is no realistic way to give money away thoughtfully and at scale without delegating if philanthropy remains a part-time endeavor.*

For most philanthropists, giving away money is a part-time activity, often amounting to a day a week at most—either because they are no longer working full time and want to keep philanthropy in balance with other pursuits, or because they are still deeply engaged in their business and simply lack the time. There is no realistic way to give money away thoughtfully and at scale without delegating if philanthropy remains a part-time endeavor.[6] It is therefore not surprising that the handful of philanthropists who are giving away substantial portions of their wealth, such as Laura and John Arnold or Bill Gates, are devoting the vast majority of their time to this work.

4. Nonprofits' ability to absorb philanthropic capital is often underestimated

One of the most common refrains Bridgespan leaders hear from philanthropists who say they want to give at a greater scale—but struggle to do so—is that individual nonprofits lack "absorptive capacity" and the pipeline of so-called "investment-ready" organizations is too small. Yet there is also a deep irony: the same

6 For a related perspective, see Glen Galaich's *Control: Why Big Giving Falls Short*.

philanthropists offering this lament are rarely willing to fund the growth capital and reasonable overhead needed to build the very organizations they say they want to support. Indeed, recent research on the large-scale unrestricted giving of MacKenzie Scott and Ballmer Group suggests that many nonprofits can make productive use of far more funding than donors often assume, without exhibiting the widespread dysfunction that skeptics might expect.

> *There is also a deep irony: the same philanthropists [lamenting that nonprofits lack "absorptive capacity"] are rarely willing to fund the growth capital and reasonable overhead needed to build the very organizations they say they want to support.*

The deeper assumption underlying this issue, though, is that many philanthropists believe nonprofits are largely ineffective and ought to be more like for-profits. Put differently, they start with a fundamental doubt that nonprofits can productively put substantially more capital to work. Again, looking at the hit rates of venture capital and private equity portfolios, one might infer that most for-profits shouldn't be invested in because only a few succeed. Yet an entirely different narrative exists around for-profit investing.

Of course, there is much to learn from for-profit organizations—indeed, a major part of Bridgespan's founding impulse was premised on that learning. Many management practices—including business planning, operating models, and decision-making frameworks—can, with appropriate adaptation, be applied usefully across sectors. But we quickly realized that not everything applies; the challenges addressed by the social sector and the dynamics of building effective nonprofits differ in important ways from those of the for-profit sector.[7] For one thing, success is often harder to measure because it often unfolds over longer time horizons and can depend on complex interactions

7 For further exploration of these differences and their implications for philanthropy, see Phil Buchanan's *Giving Done Right* and Jen Ford Reedy's *Please Be Good at Philanthropy*.

among many actors rather than solely on the performance of a single organization.

These realities do not mean nonprofits cannot productively absorb more capital, but they do make evaluating opportunities complex—especially when donors seek systems-level change. It is hard to know whether the entrenched assumptions stem from a lack of genuine curiosity about the sector or simply a rationalization for not giving, but there is no question that they slow philanthropy.

The psychological shift from building wealth to giving it away

After spending 20, 30, or 40 years building a fortune, turning around and giving it away can feel unnatural to some. Behavioral economists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky famously documented the phenomenon of "loss aversion"—the tendency for people to feel losses more intensely than equivalent gains. Giving wealth away may therefore feel psychologically heavier than continuing to accumulate or invest it, especially in domains where outcomes are difficult to measure with confidence. Indeed, many of the frictions discussed in this piece may stem from this tension, including fear of failure, an aversion to waste, and a desire for tight control.

It is notable that three of the world's most generous philanthropists today—MacKenzie Scott, Melinda French Gates, and Laurene Powell Jobs—played key roles in building the wealth they now are giving away, but they may have experienced the decades-long process of creating that wealth differently. Much has been written about gender differences in philanthropy, but it may also be that one's relationship to the process of creating wealth shapes the experience of parting with it.

The transition can be difficult for another reason as well. For many wealthy people, success has come through business—a world with clear metrics (profit and wealth) and an unambiguous sense of what "winning" looks like. Philanthropy offers no comparable scoreboard.[8] It asks donors to define success for themselves, often without clear playbooks to guide them. The shift can take someone from the top of their field—confident and accomplished—to a beginner in a new realm.

As one wealthy individual put it, "You go from a very clear set of structures and milestones—top school, top company, strong family, most money—to an age of optionality where there is no clear objective function. It is an unsettling time." For some, philanthropy may trigger what could be called "reputation loss aversion," which steers them away from moving fully into this new realm.

A third dynamic relates to identity. Philanthropy calls on individuals to express their values and exercise agency in new ways. For many, it is a more direct expression of who they are—or hope to be seen as—than their professional lives. That might help explain why people speak more often about "legacy" when discussing their philanthropy than when reflecting on the jobs through which they created their wealth. As one wealthy individual put it, "The fear of being judged is a big part of the hesitation in philanthropy, especially for people who are used to thinking of themselves as the smartest people in the room." Philanthropy, especially when visible to others, makes donors vulnerable to criticism that cuts much more deeply than an assessment of whether an investment was sound.

Even for those who begin giving significantly, other psychological dynamics can slow the pace. When a person gives away their wealth, it is gone. There is no sequel—no

8 Although various lists track philanthropic giving, they do not carry the same reputational weight—or function as a comparable scoreboard—as rankings of the wealthiest individuals.

next chapter of activity that still involves them. They are no longer solicited for their perspectives (or their money); their "work" is done. Maintaining substantial wealth can be a way to preserve status, engagement, and relevance in the world. While giving can provide a new source of status, it is not guaranteed, especially in a domain with less familiar expectations and greater personal scrutiny.

These dynamics do not explain every friction described in this essay. But they suggest that slow philanthropy may stem, in part, from concerns shared by us all—finding meaning, wanting to be competent, caring about others' views, and grappling with mortality.

Taken together, these patterns help explain why philanthropic capital continues to move slowly. They are especially mismatched with two of the theories of change with the greatest currency today: system change and localization. Systems-change strategies require alignment across multiple stakeholders (often across sectors) to produce results, which many argue emerge out of an organic unfolding of decisions and actions over time. Localization strategies hinge on communities designing their own solutions, resisting the imposition of top-down answers. In both approaches, attribution of impact is murky, and tidy assessments of inputs and outputs are rarely possible. While the growth of collaborative giving offers one way to bridge these dynamics, it has not yet been sufficient to close the gap. As a result, rather than moving closer together, the behaviors and beliefs of donors and the strategies of social change leaders are moving further apart—amplifying the frictions that slow the flow of capital to the sector.

Little frictions, big effects: Delay

In practice, these internal and external constraints produce a powerful default behavior: delay. Every nonprofit seeking support from a philanthropist is not just competing with other nonprofits, but with a donor's option to leave the money in the bank—and maybe give later. In the absence of a forcing function (such as committing assets to a vehicle with a required payout), delay is costless to the donor and is easy to rationalize. Delay is a feature, not a bug, of contemporary philanthropy.

> *Delay is a feature, not a bug, of contemporary philanthropy.*

The nature of the philanthropic choice—entirely voluntary, with no consequence for not doing it, and involving real work—makes delay a natural path of least resistance for many wealthy people. I've been in more than one conversation with donors over 75 years old who assert they are going to give most or all of their money away but have no plan for doing so. In this context, it isn't surprising that bequests—a giving pathway that is sometimes borne of strategic intention but often the result of delayed giving while living—appear to be one of the primary mechanisms through which ultra-wealthy households ultimately convert private wealth into philanthropic capital. Recent Giving USA data reinforce this pattern: charitable bequests reached a record $62 billion in 2025, growing nearly 20 percent and substantially outpacing growth in giving by living donors. Federal tax data indicate that among estates worth $50 million or more, charitable giving has hovered around 20 percent of gross estate value in recent years. Because only about half of estates in that category report charitable bequests, the implied average among those who do give is roughly 40 percent of wealth directed to charity.[9]

The scale of these transfers also appears to far exceed donors' giving while living. Although detailed data are limited and somewhat dated, a 2018 Urban Institute analysis of 2007 federal estate tax filings found that charitable bequests from estates worth more than $100 million averaged roughly 100 times the

9 Federal estate tax data analyzed by the Congressional Research Service show that charitable deductions equaled roughly 20 percent of gross estate value for taxable estates above $50 million in 2019. Separate analyses of federal estate tax filings from 2013–2017 found similar levels among estates of comparable size and found that roughly half of estates above $50 million reported charitable bequests, implying that the charitable share among those who did give was substantially higher.

donor's annual giving during the preceding five years. While this comparison captures only giving over the five years preceding death and may not reflect philanthropic assets previously transferred into charitable vehicles, it suggests that, for many ultra-wealthy donors, the decisive movement of philanthropic capital occurs at death rather than during life.

Bridgespan's approach to working with philanthropists over the past 25 years reflects our evolving understanding of these dynamics. In our early years, we emphasized that philanthropy is hard work: doing it well required strategy, careful analysis, and ambitious yet feasible goals to overcome wishful thinking. While that framing was well-intentioned, we came to see how it compounded donors' natural tendency toward caution and delay.

Today, we often say something quite different: "Don't overthink it. Get started. Learn by doing. Join a collaborative." The shift reflects a deliberate effort to counteract the gravitational pull toward delay and to help people—and their money—take action. At Bridgespan, we also talk a lot about making the experience of giving joyful. (I must confess that we are still working on this, as PowerPoint—a key mode of communication—does not lend itself to joy!) Rigor and discipline are important ingredients to effective giving, but they can be taken to an extreme where the added certainty they produce (and joy they dampen) far exceeds what's needed to give well.

3

Where Do We See Philanthropic Capital Flow—and Why?

Much of this essay has focused on why philanthropic capital tends to move slowly. But to understand what might loosen those constraints, it is useful to look at where giving has flowed more freely. Over the past two decades, alongside the uptick in collaborative funds described earlier, three areas stand out across the philanthropic landscape: bequests, donor-advised funds, and the Founders Pledge. Each represents a context in which the philanthropic impulse has come more fully to life, and all three share characteristics that may help explain what prompts people to give—or, more precisely, to make binding commitments to give.

Bequests

What makes bequests such a compelling mechanism for converting private resources into public good? In part, they sidestep many of the tensions previously described: the fear of failure, the desire for control, and the desire to remain deeply involved. To state the obvious, none of those factors apply once the donor is gone. Notably, while some donors attempt to maintain control from the grave through provisions in their wills, most bequests do not tightly prescribe future uses, with many flowing to family foundations with broad directional guidance or with full delegation to family, friends, or future independent board members.

What is most striking about bequests is how different the decision calculus is compared to giving during one's lifetime. While living, donors often construct elaborate processes and controls around their philanthropy, seeking clarity, confidence, and reassurance about how their money will be used. By contrast, charitable bequests are typically made with remarkably little direction beyond the named organization or the individuals designated to make decisions.

The contrast was vividly illustrated in a conversation a Bridgespan colleague had while advising a couple known for the rigor and thoughtfulness of their giving. They asked for guidance on how they might think about directing their wealth to philanthropy in the event that “our plane goes down.” When asked about their current will, the husband turned to the wife and asked, “Who is designated to be responsible for giving away the money when we die?” The difference in attitude and approach between the bequest (which might involve billions of dollars) and their present giving strategies was striking. As another ultra-wealthy individual explained, “I’ll be gone. I won’t be around to see what happens!”

While many academics have studied the role of time in giving—assessing, for example, the relative value of impact now versus impact later—the prevalence of bequests may have a more prosaic explanation. If giving feels complicated, heavy, and fraught with tensions during one’s lifetime, delay becomes a natural response—often extending until death, at which point the question is essentially passed on to the family members or friends designated to decide. In this sense, bequests are popular by default rather than by strategic design. As one billionaire put it, “You might think that bequests are the result of a family deciding that the next generation will be better than them at giving the money away—but that isn’t what is happening.” Bequests are also deeply private acts: people can do exactly what they wish in their will.

The revealed preference, in many cases, is to give, but to make only a few philanthropic decisions directly—often involving institutions that were meaningful to them during their lifetime, such as an alma mater—and to leave the rest for others to decide. Notably, this approach departs from the vision set out in Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth*, which urges donors to take an active role in directing their giving during their lifetimes.

Donor-advised funds

While donor-advised funds (DAFs) date back nearly a century, their rapid expansion over the past 50 years has made them one of the most significant innovations in modern philanthropy. As of 2024, DAFs held roughly $325 billion, according to the DAF Research Collaborative. That figure has likely grown substantially since then, reflecting both subsequent market appreciation and a wave of contributions made before changes to the charitable deduction took effect. They continue to grow faster than any other mechanism or institution in the philanthropic landscape.

What most distinguishes DAFs is that they allow donors to receive an immediate tax benefit when assets are contributed while deferring the decision about where those funds will ultimately be donated. This feature has faced criticism, with people often comparing DAFs to private foundations, which are subject to a 5 percent payout rate. In essence, society bears the cost of foregone taxes without a guarantee of any near-term benefit to nonprofits.

Yet in practice, DAFs on average distribute funds at rates that compare favorably to those of private foundations. By one common measure—annual grants as a share of prior-year assets—DAFs have payout rates of roughly 25 percent, compared to approximately 7 percent for private foundations. The comparison is imperfect, however, because the two vehicles were designed for different purposes: private foundations as long-term philanthropic institutions and DAFs as more flexible giving vehicles. That average payout rate masks meaningful variation across accounts: some distribute funds quickly, while others remain inactive for years (with some observers suggesting that the largest accounts distribute funds most slowly of all). Payout calculations are further complicated by transfers between donor-advised funds, which count as grants in many methodologies even though the funds remain within the DAF system. Nonetheless, DAFs represent a significant and growing source of funding for nonprofits.

While the tax benefit is clearly attractive (especially regarding deductions associated with appreciated assets), another feature may account for much of the growth of DAFs: they allow donors to act on a philanthropic impulse without having to fully dive into the work of giving. While this is a form of delay, it is delay with purpose, allowing donors to make a binding commitment to philanthropy even if they have not yet determined how or when the funds will be used. Critics of DAFs often argue that, absent DAFs, this money would otherwise flow directly to nonprofits. Given the complexities and frictions surrounding giving, however, a more likely outcome is that much of it would simply remain in private bank accounts.

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While the absence of a payout requirement, along with variation in payout rates across accounts, has fueled concerns that DAFs "warehouse" wealth, it is nonetheless true that capital put in a DAF is no longer available for personal use. For donors, transferring wealth out of their personal portfolio and into a DAF is a meaningful commitment, even if the final allocation to specific organizations occurs much later. As one ultra-wealthy individual put it, "The money is gone. I can't use it for anything other than nonprofit work. It may take a while, but it will end up supporting nonprofits."

While DAF sponsors—especially those housed in community foundations—often help donors connect to causes and organizations, the evidence is scant about whether these services are a major factor in the velocity or direction of money out of DAFs. And similar to the dynamic touched on earlier about the financial services industry, the incentives facing DAFs (especially those housed in for-profit entities) encourage preserving assets under management rather than distributing capital.

Founders Pledge

In 2015, Founders Forum (a global community supporting entrepreneurs) launched Founders Pledge, through which founders commit, on average, 2 percent of the equity in their early-stage companies to charity. The pledge is typically structured as a transfer of stock into a DAF, from which the donor can later make gifts, assuming the company is successful. Founders Pledge reports that over 2,300 founders have made this commitment, with the value of pledged assets exceeding $13.6 billion, and more than $1.9 billion already flowing into the nonprofit sector.

Like DAFs, Founders Pledge creates a philanthropic commitment before donors must decide exactly where the money will go. It also leverages a simple but powerful proposition: it is easier to give away money one doesn't yet have than to give money already sitting in a bank account.

The power of a two-step giving process

A defining feature shared by all three of these pathways is that they separate two distinct steps in the giving process: the expression of a philanthropic impulse and the determination of where the money will ultimately go. It is in that second step—as it has come to be understood and enacted over the past several decades—where the giving process most often falters, the barriers accumulate, and the flow of capital slows. By decoupling commitment from allocation, this two-step structure appears to make it easier for people to actualize their impulse to give.[10]

It is worth noting that this kind of two-step process is not new. Early in the 20th century, the founding of community foundations and community chests (later evolving into the United Way) institutionalized similar structures. Donors would give to these institutions, which were then accountable for distributing funds, often without requiring donors to be educated about specific

10 Philanthropic collaboratives can, in some cases, operate in a similar two-step fashion. In models where donors commit funds up front and then participate in allocation decisions over time—or delegate those decisions to the collaborative itself—the initial act of commitment is separated from the ultimate deployment of capital. At the same time, collaborative structures vary widely in the timing and structure of commitments, and do not consistently maintain a clear separation between the act of committing funds and decisions about their ultimate use.

causes or organizations. (This history is well documented in *Philanthropy in America: A History* by Oliver Zunz.) Over time, however, pressures to give donors more choice and visibility into where their money was going began to change these intermediary models; designated giving at United Ways and DAFs at community foundations gained prominence.

A key difference between these earlier models and today's growing pathways lies in the degree of control over the second step. In the past, donors were asked to relinquish control over allocation while they were still alive and actively giving—a process that has eroded over time. As Claire Dunning documents in her fascinating work on philanthropy and social change in Boston in the 1970s, early two-step initiatives that gave other institutions the right to allocate capital could initially function well, but donor discomfort with having limited visibility into use and impact quickly surfaced. In the Boston case, after a successful first year of the initiative, donors' requests for information and involvement increased, frustrations with the process grew, and the effort ultimately unraveled.

By contrast, the contemporary two-step mechanisms that have gained traction resolve this tension differently. In the case of bequests, donors effectively cede control over allocation only after death, eliminating the possibility of frustration (and accountability) with how decisions are ultimately made. In the case of DAFs and Founders Pledge, donors make a commitment up front while retaining authority over the second step. In both cases, the psychological hurdle of commitment is lowered without requiring donors to give up control. While these mechanisms do not necessarily eliminate slowness in the ultimate disbursement of funds to nonprofits, they may represent meaningful progress against one important dimension of slow philanthropy: increasing the share of private wealth that is firmly committed to eventual philanthropic use rather than remaining indefinitely in personal control. Nonetheless, important questions remain about how, and how quickly, those deferred distribution decisions will ultimately be made.

One of the most notable aspects of bequests, DAFs, and Founders Pledge (as well as giving to higher education; see sidebar "A philanthropic outlier: Top universities" below) is that they operate at a step removed from the market-oriented efforts described earlier to help donors identify, evaluate, and select philanthropic opportunities. This is not to suggest that better information, careful vetting, or robust feedback loops do not matter. Rather, these elements may be more loosely coupled to the actual flow of philanthropic capital than is often assumed—vital to the operation of the intermediaries charged with making decisions about the selection of grantees and the allocation of capital, but at some distance from the donors themselves.

By making the initial act of commitment relatively simple—and deferring or reshaping the demands of allocation—these mechanisms make it easier for donors to act on their philanthropic impulse. The simplicity and ease with which people can take this first, irrevocable step may offer one of the clearest insights into what it will take to unlock much greater giving from the ultra-wealthy.

A philanthropic outlier: Top universities

As Oliver Zunz observes in *Philanthropy in America: A History*, "Institutions of higher education, as they had been the first beneficiaries of big-money philanthropy, became professional fundraisers' biggest clients." In one of the earliest large-scale pushes in higher education fundraising, Zunz describes how one of the country's first fundraising firms led 14 university campaigns from 1919 to 1925, raising $68 million.

Higher education has remained an outlier ever since. Its unusual success in attracting major gifts offers a useful case study of the conditions and practices that may help philanthropy flow more readily.

The scale of that success remains striking. In the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*'s database of publicly reported gifts from individuals and their foundations, colleges and universities have accounted for roughly 60 percent of gifts of $10 million or more over the past decade.

One obvious reason is their ready pool of prospects: alumni, many of whom attribute at least part of their success to their education and feel lasting gratitude toward the institution. Grateful beneficiaries are a potent source of philanthropy.

That advantage, however, is only part of the story. A recent study by Ben Porter of gifts of $5 million or more to 24 universities found that 27 percent came from non-alumni donors—suggesting that a substantial share of major gifts is driven by factors beyond personal affiliation alone.

An important factor behind gifts to universities is their perceived durability. As long-standing institutions, making a major gift to them—or including one in a will—has historically felt like a relatively safe philanthropic bet. (Today, however, with universities facing growing critiques about their politics and efficacy, alongside shifting perceptions about the value of higher education itself, this may change.)

Beyond that durability, major universities have built some of the most extensive fundraising operations in the nonprofit sector, often employing large advancement teams that can number in the hundreds, paying chief advancement leaders total compensation in the mid-six figures or more, and assigning major gift officers relatively small portfolios of donors—at some leading programs dipping into the 45 to 60 range—to enable intensive, high-touch cultivation.

These teams are designed to build relationships with wealthy prospects over decades, often culminating in major gifts later in life or substantial bequests. Outside of higher education, and similarly durable major health care and cultural institutions, few nonprofits—The Nature Conservancy being a notable exception—have developed fundraising operations capable of sustaining this kind of long-term, relationship-driven approach.

4

Getting Money Moving Faster

Many of those efforts to speed up philanthropy—particularly in recent decades—have drawn on business and market analogies, from strategic and outcomes-based philanthropy to venture philanthropy and effective altruism. These approaches have clearly resonated with some donors and have supported important work. Yet even as they have taken hold, the overall flow of philanthropic capital has remained stubbornly resistant to breakthrough growth.

This essay is not intended to be a "how-to" guide.[11] The patterns already described do not point to an obvious solution for unlocking further giving by the ultra-wealthy. At the same time, there are glimmers of possibility—emerging ideas, practices, and developments that may point toward new ways of thinking about the challenge or help accelerate the flow of philanthropy. The examples that follow are not meant to be comprehensive or prescriptive. Rather, they illustrate a handful of promising directions that may prove important in the years ahead.

Restore the luster of charitable giving

Mindsets and norms profoundly shape how people act. Over the past few decades, the strategic philanthropy paradigm has

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11 There are many resources for donors and advisors seeking to support (and motivate) giving and overcome common roadblocks. Among them, the National Center for Family Philanthropy and the Philanthropy Roundtable offer a variety of useful guides. Nick Allardice's piece, "How to actually give money away," provides insightful guidance and watch-outs. Phil Buchanan's *Giving Done Right* and Jen Ford Reedy's *Please Be Good at Philanthropy* similarly draw on decades of experience to explore what giving done well looks like in practice.

deeply informed how donors approach their giving. The Giving Pledge, in turn, expanded people's sense of how much they might give, even if follow-through has thus far been uneven.

As the strategic philanthropy paradigm faces growing challenges, glimmers of new possibilities—often rooted in old patterns—are emerging for how people might undertake their philanthropy. Here are three early signals that may point to how giving could unfold in the years ahead—a new chapter that perhaps will not be defined by a single dominant model. Ariel Simon speaks to this possibility in a recent *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article, suggesting that, "Embracing the varied intentions that motivate people to give offers a more resilient, pluralistic path forward."

Reinvigorating big charity alongside strategic giving

As already noted, strategic philanthropy practices—often embodied in high donor control, more complex systems-change strategies, or both—produce frictions that slow giving. One alternative is to reinvigorate "big charity": large-scale gifts with direct impact. Scholarship programs, medical debt relief, direct cash transfers, and land conservation are often overlooked because they are not seen as "strategic" or as "solving" the problem—but should they be? If the choice is between zero impact (because the frictions of strategic giving prevent a donor from making a gift) or a direct gift that enables a thousand young people to make it to and through college, which is preferable? (Direct giving versus systems-change solutions is often a false dichotomy anyway, as each often shapes the other.)

> *Scholarship programs, medical debt relief, direct cash transfers, and land conservation are often overlooked because they are not seen as "strategic" or as "solving" the problem—but should they be?*

It is notable that in late 2025, several major philanthropic commitments of this type were announced: Michael and Susan Dell donating $6.25 billion to investment accounts for children, Ray and Barbara Dalio doing the same for all children in Connecticut, and Ballmer Group committing $1.7 billion to fund an additional 10,000 slots for early education in Washington State. Interestingly, these examples also turn a philanthropic bromide on its head—rather than philanthropy innovating and government scaling, government is in the lead, and philanthropic capital is following.

A related possibility is a renewed emphasis on institution building. A recent *SSIR* article argues that philanthropy has shifted away from the institution-building traditions of earlier generations of donors toward more project-based and systems-change approaches. While that critique likely overstates the case, it raises an important question: Are there opportunities to accelerate giving by directing more capital toward building and strengthening institutions with the capacity to contribute to society over many decades? Research centers, public spaces, cultural institutions, and other enduring civic assets can absorb large-scale investments while generating long-term benefits. Contemporary examples include George Kaiser's support for Tulsa's Gathering Place; David Rubenstein's gifts to restore the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial; Michael Bloomberg's support for The Shed (an arts center in New York City); and Paul Allen's creation of the Allen Institute for Brain Science. For some donors, institution building may offer another path for putting substantial resources to work without many of the frictions that can accompany more complex theories of change.

More broadly, organizations like GiveDirectly and the Bridge Project have channeled hundreds of millions of dollars into cash transfers, reflecting the growing interest in this mode of philanthropy. One observer calls this "redistributive philanthropy," though more than one ultra-wealthy philanthropist has told me such branding is unlikely to attract their peers, even if it is descriptively accurate.

Reacquainting donors with "the gift"

This essay has already discussed how much of the friction in philanthropy emanates from an expectation that giving ought to operate in market-like ways. But what if the paradigm shifted?

One possibility is offered by Jason Lewis, who has written over the past few years about philanthropy as a "gift" versus a strategic investment. The "gift" offers a different orientation—one that emphasizes generosity, mutual aid, community, relationships, and moral obligation rather than optimization and ROI.[12] Religious and Indigenous traditions across cultures and centuries are full of stories that center gift-giving, and anthropologists have shown how gift exchange can form the basis of an economy and serve as the fabric of society. More recently, biologists have illuminated how mutuality and reciprocity undergird healthy natural ecosystems, and biomimicry has explored what we can learn from these processes to imagine and to reimagine human society.

It is worth noting that the most generous individual philanthropist of this century, MacKenzie Scott, refers to her philanthropy as "gifts"—not grants, investments, or donations. The essays she's written that accompany her philanthropy convey a rigor to the process, but her description of her work is notably free of the elements that introduce friction for so many philanthropists: fear of failure and waste, and desire to control.

Defining "enough"

The idea that individuals with great wealth might benefit from defining what constitutes "enough" for themselves is far from new. At its core, the concept involves clarifying how much wealth people believe they need to support their desired lifestyle, provide for their families, and maintain a meaningful financial cushion, and distinguishing that from resources beyond those needs that could potentially be directed toward philanthropy.

Variations of this idea have surfaced repeatedly across generations. Carnegie's *The Gospel of Wealth* argued that surplus fortunes carried moral obligations to society. Claude Rosenberg's "New Tithing" movement and his book *Wealthy and Wise* encouraged

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12 C. Thi Nguyen's *The Score: How to Stop Playing Somebody Else's Game* offers a complementary critique of systems organized around metrics and optimization. Nguyen argues that scoring systems can create a "facade of objectivity" that gradually narrows or obscures the underlying values they are meant to serve—a dynamic he describes as "values capture" (see pp. 259–271). His analysis may help illuminate some of the tensions between highly strategic philanthropy and philanthropy conceived more as a gift or moral practice.

affluent individuals to think more intentionally about "excess wealth," even developing financial models intended to help advisors identify it in practice. Initiatives such as #HalfMyDAF and the Enough Project reflect similar objectives, as did Chuck Feeney and Atlantic Philanthropies' efforts to promote "giving while living." Yet despite recurring interest in these ideas, they have historically had limited success in meaningfully accelerating philanthropy at scale.

There are signs that the conditions for this approach may now be shifting, at least for some donors. In separate conversations over the past year, two ultra-wealthy individuals described how arriving at a clearer definition of "enough" reshaped their approach to giving. As one put it, "With clarity that we do not under any circumstance 'need' 85 percent of our wealth, it became much easier to think about giving the 'excess' away. We still approach our philanthropy with rigor, but we are no longer slowed down with discussions of 'Can we do this?'" Another donor noted that "the 'excess wealth' bucket doesn't need to be obsessively managed and monitored ... we are able to give more easily."

At the same time, newer initiatives and books, such as Ingrid Robeyns' *Limitarianism* and Chris Anderson's *Infectious Generosity,* suggest renewed interest in questions of sufficiency, surplus, and obligation. Whether this emerging energy proves more durable than earlier efforts remains to be seen. Yet in a moment of unprecedented wealth concentration, the idea of defining "enough" may be finding greater resonance than it has in the past.

Expand the reach of charitable bequests

Today, the vast majority of charitable bequest dollars either endow private foundations or flow to elite higher education, health, and culture institutions. Two explanations are often offered for why money flows this way: longstanding personal trust ("I trust my kids to figure it out") and institutional trust built through decades of intentional cultivation ("I loved my undergraduate experience and have maintained a long relationship with my alma mater—I trust that they'll use the money well.").

But what if charitable bequests to a broader range of nonprofits were made easier? A possible signal of what could be unlocked by building stronger pathways for charitable bequests is shown by the platform FreeWill. This tool enables people to write their wills at no cost while highlighting opportunities to include nonprofit beneficiaries. Since its founding a decade ago, users have collectively committed more than $13 billion to over 2,300 nonprofit partners. FreeWill serves people across income levels, but the broader question is whether analogous approaches for ultra-wealthy donors could activate even greater flows of capital. Bequests operate in a different psychological register: the frictions of deciding where to give may feel less acute when distribution lies in the future.

> *But what if charitable bequests to a broader range of nonprofits were made easier?*

In 2018, Bridgespan highlighted the significance of this idea in the report *Four Pathways to Greater Giving*, through the pathway titled "A high-impact way for donors to bet big on improving economic mobility." While funds such as Blue Meridian have been created to support donors in giving during their lifetimes, the report suggested that as much as 3 times more giving could be unlocked if an institution were built specifically to facilitate bequest giving. So far, no one has taken up that agenda, which is perhaps unsurprising given that it would likely require a significant, long-term investment in relationship building and trust, along with collective action, since very few organizations could justify such an investment on their own. Yet the payoff—measured both in philanthropic capital mobilized and social impact generated—could be substantial.

Add payout requirements for DAFs

As we've seen, DAFs account for a large and growing share of philanthropic capital. Contributions to DAFs represent a meaningful form of progress against slow philanthropy—a binding commitment to charitable use, even if decisions about timing and recipients remain deferred. The simplest and surest way to accelerate that giving further would be to adjust their payout requirements. The Accelerating Charitable Efforts (ACE) Act, introduced in Congress in 2021, would require that DAF contributions be distributed within 15 years. Although this legislation has stalled, it represents one of the most significant efforts since the 1969 Tax Bill (which largely established today's philanthropy tax framework) to revisit the rules and regulations governing charitable giving. (For a good overview of proposals for charitable giving tax reform, see this article by law professors Roger Colinvaux and Ray Madoff.)

While many DAFs distribute funds relatively quickly, a significant share of accounts move funds much more slowly. A 2024 study by the DAF Research Collaborative found that 22 percent of DAF accounts were dormant and another 30 percent had payout rates below 10 percent. A payout rate requirement or a time limit could meaningfully affect outflows into the social sector.

To be sure, stricter payout requirements could prompt some donors to reduce their DAF contributions, though it is not obvious this would occur—especially if, for example, it is more than a few years away. A growing chorus—including some philanthropists themselves—is calling for faster distribution of DAF assets. Laura and John Arnold have been active supporters of the ACE Act. Groups of wealthy individuals such as Solidaire Network, Patriotic Millionaires, and Resource Generation are advocating for faster spend-outs of philanthropic capital, and initiatives like #HalfMyDAF, Free Your DAF, DAF Day, and Assets Under Movement are encouraging donors to pay out a meaningful share of their DAF holdings. Not surprisingly, the for-profit financial services industry, as well as nonprofit groups representing community foundations, have generally opposed legislative changes, often under the banner of preserving philanthropic freedom.

Enable greater privacy in giving

While the common trope holds that philanthropy is driven by the desire for recognition—names on buildings and public acclaim—the patterns highlighted here suggest that privacy might, in fact, be a meaningful unlock, even as public recognition continues to matter for some donors. In many contexts where philanthropic impulses are most readily expressed—DAFs, bequests, and binding pledges—giving is not contingent on public recognition, at least in the first instance. Indeed, DAFs permit donors to give anonymously, and many choose to do so.

In a world where big philanthropy is no longer viewed as an unalloyed good—and where public giving can invite criticism—visibility adds friction. One major donor I know recently moved the family's philanthropy from a private foundation to a DAF to spare the family the scrutiny and backlash that can accompany donations to the organizations they support. It is important to acknowledge that greater privacy in giving sits uneasily alongside the democratic principle of transparency, especially as it relates to those with large sums of money influencing society. Still, it is worth asking whether there are ways to better balance the benefits of transparency with the possibility that greater discretion could help unlock more giving.

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Closing Thoughts

There is no single answer to how to speed up giving by the ultra-wealthy. In the United States, philanthropy is a personal choice—whether to give, how much and how fast to give, and what to give to—and the alchemy of personal and external factors influencing each person's decisions is unique. Yet even within that complexity, efforts to influence giving can create "chutes and ladders" that impede or accelerate it. I hope this essay, while far from comprehensive, has helpfully highlighted some of the forces that may be slowing the flow of philanthropy, as well as a few areas where greater attention could help move more capital toward the public good more quickly.

There are crucial questions we, as a society, need to ask about the concentration of wealth and the extent to which our collective destiny is in the hands of a few people. (See sidebar "A deeper question: What role should philanthropy play in a healthy society?" on the next page.) Here, my focus has been narrower: understanding why people who express a desire to give away substantial wealth often struggle to fulfill their own stated objectives.

Speeding up philanthropy matters because of the extraordinary amount of capital poised to move into the sector—vastly larger than what donors have had available to direct to philanthropy over the past 100 years. It also matters because philanthropy plays an important role in the health and vitality of society. Private action for the public good can spur innovation, strengthen society's connective tissue, and help fill gaps left by markets and government.

The late Paul Ylvisaker once described philanthropy as "society's passing gear." At a time of profound challenges, we need more of that energy to help us create a world where all people can thrive, and society can flourish. The rich variety of action enabled by philanthropy—from neighborhoods to the globe—will be a critical part of the story future generations tell about whether we were good ancestors.

A deeper question: What role should philanthropy play in a healthy society?

The patterns explored in this essay suggest that philanthropy's institutions and norms—even as new mechanisms and intermediaries emerge to accelerate giving—are not built to accommodate today's extraordinary scale and concentration of wealth. At the same time, they invite reflection on whether so much wealth should be concentrated in private hands in the first place. This question extends well beyond the bounds of this essay and is already the subject of vigorous public debate. Proposals for wealth taxes in a variety of states, whatever their ultimate merits or consequences, reflect broader concerns about the level of inequality that now exists in society.

In many theories of society, philanthropy is viewed as society's risk capital—sparking innovation, addressing temporary or urgent needs, and filling gaps created by evolving dynamics of markets and government. But today's scale and concentration of wealth may be stretching that traditional role beyond its historical bounds. Slow philanthropy may therefore reflect not only friction in the giving process, but also a mismatch between the old (and still reigning) architecture of giving and today's distribution of wealth.

The growing ambition in philanthropy to "solve society's problems" may, in part, be an effort to reconcile that mismatch—to align immense private wealth with a corresponding large aspiration for social impact. Yet it also invites reflection on the extent to which we, as a society, should depend on private action for the provision of public goods.

Yes, we need to unlock greater philanthropy from the wealthy. But we may also need to revisit what we expect philanthropy, markets, and government each to contribute to the provision of public goods—and shape our policies and institutions accordingly—if we are to have a vibrant, resilient society in which all people can flourish.

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