

No More Half Measures

Five Ways Foundations Can Better
Support Policy Campaigns and Build
Lasting Advocacy Capacity



By Scott Downes with the
Center for Evaluation Innovation



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Introduction



“I think that the day we thought that Roe [v. Wade] was an endpoint and not a beginning point for women’s empowerment, they started to chip away at our rights.”

This quote is from Ilyse Hogue, President, NARAL Pro-Choice America, during a segment on Samantha Bee’s new late-night talk show about legislative attacks on reproductive rights and resulting court cases. The interview aired this past February—43 years and 1 month after Roe v. Wade was decided.

While the reproductive rights movement has fought hard to advance and protect progress, Hogue’s comment and the timespan it represents illustrate the long arc of policy fights, the near-constant oppositional efforts, and the subsequent need for funders to remain attentive and vigilant in their advocacy efforts. Few policy wins are conclusive now, if they ever were at all. It’s rare that advocacy and policy work simply ends with the passage of a bill, a ballot initiative victory, or even a court ruling. There is seldom, if ever, a neat and tidy beginning, middle, and end.

This is true of the push for comprehensive immigration reform, which is still marked by disappointing results after more than 10 years of work – even though demographic realities make success seem somehow inevitable. It’s also true of the fights for fiscal, tax, and budget reform at the state and federal levels, which are characterized by ongoing offensive and defensive successes over the last two decades. It’s true of the debate over children’s health care and coverage expansion, which is both an example of an enormous national policy success and unrealized progress in specific states. And it’s also true of the Affordable Care Act and the Supreme Court’s ruling on marriage equality, both of which are recent hallmarks of social progress – yet still at risk of being undone as the policy landscape and political tides continue to shift and evolve.

Advocates and funders often experience these long arcs of policy engagement differently. Advocates, in it for the long haul by virtue of their organizational missions, must negotiate both short-term fluctuations and long-term shifts, windows of opportunity that open and close, threats that emerge and subside, and tension between tactical policy wins and the longer view of “moving toward victory over time.” They are always piecing together the resources, capacities, relationships, and strategies it will take to stay in the game and keep policy progress going.

But funders have the luxury of setting discrete goals and timeframes for their advocacy engagement, after which they can pull out and turn to new goals and strategies with a new set of partners and grantees. They can – and often do – choose between funding policy campaigns to achieve a particular policy goal or investing in advocacy capacity building ... as though advocacy capacity and policy goals can be untangled. The consequence? Grantmakers who fund policy campaigns without simultaneously considering how their funding choices affect long-term advocacy capacity risk leaving policy wins vulnerable and defenseless to oppositional interests, or leaving a field of advocates no better prepared for the next policy battles. Funders who invest in advocacy capacity without linking it to specific policy targets risk pulling advocates’ attention from their own pressing policy goals and never seeing new capacities materialize into policy progress.

“I think grantees don’t spend nearly as much time thinking about where money comes from, in terms of capacity or policy campaigns, as funders do. I think there are limitations to thinking about them separately. Grantees are just trying to do two things: pursue their vision and mission, and trying to keep the doors of their organization open.”

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF AN ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION

To explore funder mindset and grantmaking approaches that are supportive of the long arc of policy work, The Atlantic Philanthropies commissioned the Atlas Learning Project to explore its own experiences – and those of other funders and advocates who have been caught in the tension between policy campaigns and advocacy capacity. This brief draws on two dozen interviews with foundation staff, advocates, evaluators, and other experts, and considers the funding patterns of several long-term advocacy strategies. The interviews identified and explored examples of how different foundations struck a balance between supporting policy goals and advocacy capacity. The research also examined relevant literature, select evaluation reports and Atlantic grant documents, along with extensive discussions with current and former Atlantic staff.

From this research, we came to believe that funders, no matter their size or their appetite for long-term funding commitments, have to get better at designing grantmaking strategies that meet the dual demands of advocacy capacity needs and the realities of the policy and political landscape. In other words, how can funders, like advocates, treat capacity building and policy progress as inextricably linked? Doing otherwise means funders are only getting halfway to where they need to go—and likely limiting their own effectiveness, as well as that of advocates they support.

Understanding the Terms



Advocacy Capacity Building

Capacity building is a sometimes poorly-defined, catch-all term that can mean different things to different people. Much has been researched and written about capacity building in general, and this brief does not intend to cover or re-examine that ground.

In this brief, we focus instead on capacity building specifically for advocacy and policy work. By this we mean “using financial support, training, coaching, or mentoring to increase the ability of an organization or group to lead, adapt, manage, and technically implement an advocacy strategy.”



Policy Campaigns

A policy campaign is any focused and sustained effort to advocate for and influence decision-making on public policy through legislative, administrative, regulatory, or legal means. Philanthropy can play an instrumental role, and has for decades, in advancing public policy across many different issues.

Similar to capacity building, much has been explored about how to develop and manage effective policy campaigns. This brief does not intend to examine the how-to's, but rather proposes how policy campaigns, targets, and goals can or should be more closely connected and integrated with advocacy capacity building efforts, and vice versa.

SOURCE. Raynor, J. et al. (2015). Capacity Building 3.0: How to Strengthen the Social Ecosystem. TCC Group. Coffman, J. and Beer, T. (2015). The Advocacy Strategy Framework. Center for Evaluation Innovation.

SOURCE. Bernholz, L. and Wang, T. Building Fields for Policy Change. Blueprint Research & Design Inc. 2010.

Three Examples Highlighted in the Research



1

Children's Health

Over the last several years, Atlantic and other funders have supported various campaigns to improve and advocate for children's health, including Kidswell, a national advocacy campaign focused on successful health care reform implementation on behalf of children; the Narrative Project, which was a Packard Foundation communications capacity building effort to support state-based advocates with intensive, targeted technical assistance to grantees to advance progress on children's health insurance coverage; and the Finish Line Project, which was a collaborative effort among Georgetown University Center for Children and Families, state-based children's health care advocates, Spitfire Strategies, and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation to engage state and national partners in improving health care coverage for kids.

2

State Priorities Partnership

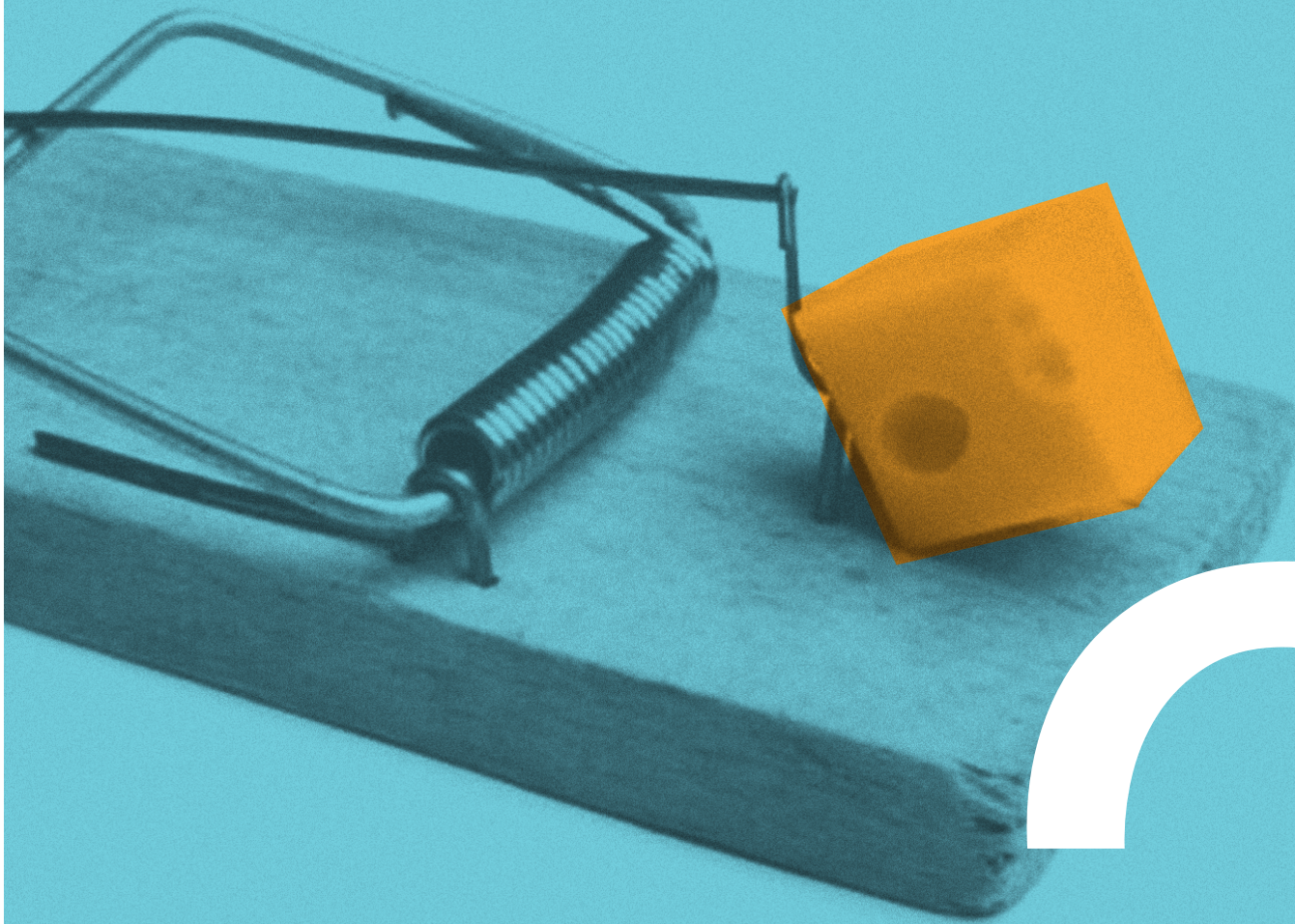
SPP started in 1992 as the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative, an effort to build capacity in states to address critical tax and budget questions, fill gaps in policy analysis, inform fiscal debates, and educate policymakers. It's now a network of more than 40 independent research and policy advocacy organizations across as many states. SPP is supported by core funders, including the Ford Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Open Society Institute, as well as in-state funding partners. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities serves as a coordinating entity, intermediary, expert, and re-granting platform.

3

Comprehensive Immigration Reform

The Atlantic Philanthropies invested more than \$70 million over 11 years to support reform to the U.S. immigration system. This investment extended over three distinct multi-year campaigns, and included direct campaign grants and support for more than 70 immigration advocacy organizations. Though the ultimate policy objective has not been achieved, many advances have been made in coalescing the field, creating windows of opportunity for progress, cultivating strong leadership and organizational capacity, and developing solid organizing and communications capacity.

What the either/or advocacy
trap looks like for funders



Does this sound familiar to you? Unreasonable expectations, treading water, cold feet, “off ramps” and other traps funders can find themselves in.

There are several familiar scenarios that signal when foundations are not successfully integrating policy targets with capacity building support:

- » An advocacy funding initiative shutters prematurely—after only a year or two—because the investment did not yield more immediate, measurable results the foundation expected.
- » A grantee selection process only funds high-capacity advocacy groups and excludes other key voices in the field—often grassroots groups—that are critical to longer-term success.
- » Program staff know the field needs capacity support, but can’t sell it to the board because it seems too indirectly connected to the foundation’s impact goals.
- » Advocates are exhausted by yet another round of technical assistance and training that is distracting them from their “real work” and the time crunch of the current legislative session.
- » A Chief Executive Officer disguises support for a policy campaign as a capacity building effort to alleviate board fears of politicization or partisanship.
- » Board members lose patience with a multi-year advocacy capacity effort that does not seem to be yielding legislative progress.

Funders’ orientation toward supporting either policy campaigns or advocacy capacity often begins in the boardroom.

Some foundation boards may not agree that philanthropy can or should directly engage in policy change, while others may not believe that building advocacy capacity can have the desired near-term impact. And in some cases, foundation decision-makers who are further away from the on-the-ground work lack a clear view of the relationship between capacity and policy progress over the long-term.

These views often result from how a funder first came into the policy arena. Risk tolerance among foundations varies widely depending on a foundation’s experience with advocacy and policy, as well as its understanding of how policy itself is moved.

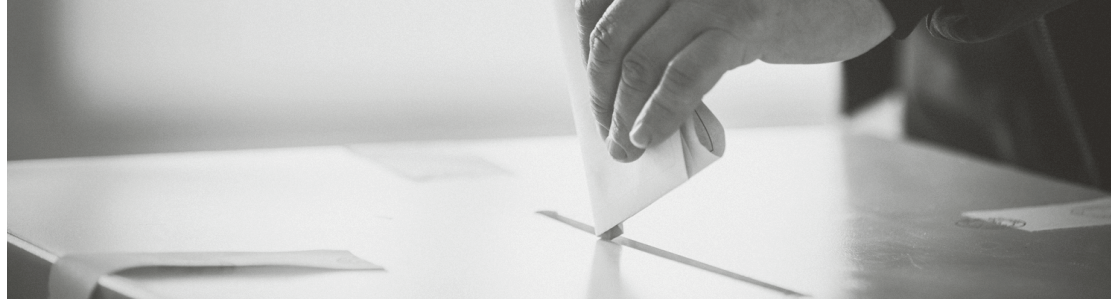
Funders newer to policy advocacy may not have a clear picture of how or where to engage, and can gravitate toward a capacity building orientation that is viewed as less risky than a policy campaign approach.

“Some funders don’t really understand advocacy, and don’t understand what moves issues,” said a program officer at a national foundation. “This leads to a lot of non-specific general support funding, and frequently reflects that funders don’t know what to ask grantees to do.”

“If somebody gives a nonprofit money to pursue a policy campaign, implicit in that granting is the assumption that you have advocacy capacity. So grantees are saying in essence we already have the capacity to do this. Whether they actually do is a separate question, but it’s implicit in the grant. No smart funder is going to give money to someone to accomplish a particular policy outcome if they don’t have the advocacy chops.”

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF AN ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION





→ “Some funders don’t really understand advocacy, and don’t understand what moves issues. This leads to a lot of non-specific general support funding, and frequently reflects that funders don’t know what to ask grantees to do.”

PROGRAM OFFICER
AT A NATIONAL FOUNDATION

By contrast, many funders come to policy advocacy with a zero-sum view of wins and losses, and lean toward policy campaigns where the gains are clearer. These funders often believe that capacity building requires large, unending grants with vague outcomes. They value the tangible, near-term wins that hard policy targets promise, and see less appeal in building capacity to guard against backsliding or to support defensive efforts that protect progress.

The modern reality is that foundations need to engage in—or at a minimum be mindful of—both approaches to be effective and successful in advancing and sustaining change.

This doesn’t mean a funder has to fund everything, forever, when it comes to advocacy support. It also does not preclude funders who are only able to make smaller grants or commit to shorter time-frames from engaging in advocacy efforts. Rather, it makes attention to the broader funding landscape and policy context all the more important.

In practice, a blended approach to supporting both policy campaigns and building advocacy capacity can play out differently within different foundation types working across a spectrum of issue areas.

For The Atlantic Philanthropies, the board and leadership emphasized hard policy targets more than capacity building for a period of time, though both policy goals and capacity approaches were prioritized within some funding initiatives. For a collaborative like the State Priorities Partnership, its funders have been hard-wired from the beginning to utilize both approaches. Many smaller funders and state-based foundations evolve from one orientation into a more blended approach as they learn more about what’s effective for advocacy and policy change efforts.

How funders address key decision points and the balance between these approaches can have lasting consequences for advocacy efforts and grantees’ work.

As one funder described, “Our experience has been that, with grants for capacity, we are best able to see success in terms of strong capacity when we are working with grantees on a specific [policy] issue. Recently, we put out an RFP that explicitly said ‘this is to build your capacity to make an impact on a particular issue.’ For instance, if you’re looking to expand your communications capacity, don’t just tell us you need a communications director, tell us where it is that you see the opportunities for a win—either on offense or defense—in the next couple years. Otherwise, it’s too hard to get our heads around why this capacity is needed and what kind of person you need in this role. It’s hard for me to imagine giving a capacity grant without a clear understanding of ‘Okay, if we give you this grant, it’s going to allow you to move the needle in some way, shape, or form on what issues.’”

How funder choices can play out on the ground



KIDS COUNT

Funders that supported capacity for children's health research and the annual Kids Count report were dissatisfied that the data itself was not resulting in policy advances. Over time, this led to changes in their approach that more closely connected and integrated the research capacity with specific policy targets and correlating advocacy work.



CHILDREN'S HEALTH

In Florida, a legislative effort on children's health required bipartisan outreach. An advocacy group obtained support to contract with a Republican lobbyist. The legislation passed, but the capacity in question was completely external to the organization itself, leaving the advocate no better equipped for future battles, and the policy itself vulnerable to changes.



ORAL HEALTH

When the Missouri state legislature cut adult dental Medicaid eligibility and services, there were no groups to fight back. Few funders had invested in building advocacy capacity for oral health. Since then, an oral health coalition—with support from funders—has engaged in policy work and has gotten close to restoring those cuts in the last two years.



IMMIGRATION REFORM

Despite recent policy setbacks for comprehensive immigration reform, The Atlantic Philanthropies continued to adapt and shift its strategies over the long-term because there was a belief that an opportunity for future policy wins would arise again, and they did not want to have to dismantle the effort only to build it back up again.



When funders overly focus on policy campaign approach

When funders overly focus on capacity building approach

Behaviors and Decision Points



TIME HORIZON. The duration of support is often tied to an election cycle or legislative session.

GRANT STRUCTURE. Grants are restricted to exclusive use for execution of a policy campaign, with the assumption that capacity already exists.

GRANTEE SELECTION. Funders select organizations perceived or known to have high capacity, the most influence, and relevant skills related to the policy issue.

GRANTEE SUPPORT. Gaps in skills and capacity are addressed with external “capacity extenders,” such as intermediaries and consultants.

DURABILITY. Resources only support temporary infrastructure exclusively tied to the policy campaign, e.g. contact database, organizing and mobilization, communications platforms, etc.

OUTCOMES. Funders hold grantees accountable for policy wins, and measure success solely through that lens.

TIME HORIZON. The duration of support is often tied to a funder’s timeline or grant cycle.

GRANT STRUCTURE. Grants are often general operating support or targeted to address specific capacities, e.g. leadership development, strategy planning, communications, etc.

GRANTEE SELECTION. Organizations are chosen based on perceived capacity gaps, sometimes informed by organizational capacity assessments.

GRANTEE SUPPORT. Trainings and technical assistance are often one-off, episodic, or offered to a group or cohort as a whole, e.g. all grantees get one-time message training or share the same communications consultant.

DURABILITY. Capacities and skills are intended to last beyond the life of a grant.

OUTCOMES. Funders hold grantees accountable for changes in capacity in the abstract, not necessarily tied to changed advocacy behavior and increased influence within the policy arena.

Consequences of Choices



POOR TIMING. Policy change windows often take years to develop. If campaign funding is started too early without the capacity build-up, the wins can be less likely to happen and funders can prematurely lose appetite for funding a policy change effort.

EXCLUSION OF FIELD. Advocates not included in the campaign can get caught in a cycle of impoverishment, so that groups that fill other niches (e.g., grassroots organizers), or engage less powerful constituencies, do not have resources and capacity to be ready for future windows of opportunity.

BACKSLIDING AND OPPOSITION. Policy campaigns not supported by more durable advocacy capacity are left vulnerable and can be just “one bad election away” from a win being undone.

TEMPORARY INFRASTRUCTURE. Support for campaign-specific external consultants, lobbyists, public opinion research, or contact databases are all helpful and effective tools, but in isolation those tools do not build up and get embedded in the field over time after each successive campaign. Rather, they have to be rebuilt each time.

UNREALISTIC TIMELINE AND EXPECTATIONS. If funders have arbitrary timetables for success, or expectations of what will happen as a result of capacity funding, yet do not see policy progress materializing, foundation boards can lose appetite to provide such support.

CAPACITY DOESN'T STICK. If capacity support is disconnected from the “real work” advocates have to do to advance their policy goals, or determined unilaterally by funder, advocates neither gain real skills that help them with current policy goals nor do they have a clear opportunity to put new skills into practice – which we know is necessary for capacity building to take hold.

LACK OF POLICY INFLUENCE. If attention is not given to capacities and skills that move policy in specific political contexts, advocates move no closer to having real power to influence the policy process because they’re not actualizing their increased capacities in their day-to-day work.

CAPACITY DRIFT. Capacity support from a variety of different funders can obligate advocates to spend too much time on organizational development or other capacity aspects that might be disconnected from work that moves their issues—which, in turn, can sabotage opportunities for policy wins.

The tension at Atlantic

At Atlantic,¹ the question of how best to support advocacy and policy change sparked lots of internal discussions at both the board and staff levels about what kind of approaches would make a difference in near-term policy fights and leave lasting infrastructure for future efforts. There was a sense felt by some, around 2009-2011, that there had been too much focus in the past on capacity support for familiar groups with vague goals, and not enough on hard policy targets.

A slight shift followed, with greater emphasis on project and campaign funding. Grant recommendations and board proposals were more explicitly focused on policy impact, with concrete goals, specific activities within initiatives, and easily measurable actions. Atlantic continued to experiment though with a capacity building unit that worked alongside grant officers within particular initiatives.

Some staff felt the shift in focus to hard policy targets neglected capacity needs and did not leave enough space to adapt. Without specific support for core elements of advocacy capacity, such as communications, organizing, or leadership development, concerns were raised about sustaining healthy, strong advocacy organizations. In some cases, there wasn't a shared belief and clarity around the actual indicators that mattered, such as more difficult-to-measure indicators of organizational or field-level strengths versus activity measures that related to hard policy targets.

This all coincided with the gradual nearing of the end of Atlantic's grantmaking, which prompted more thinking about both how to make a big impact on policy targets now, better prepare the field for foundation's funding to end, and equip anchor organizations and others with more lasting investments in capacity.

Eventually, a better balance was struck internally that reflected the realities of grant initiatives on the ground: that both policy results and capacity mattered a great deal, and one approach by itself was not sufficient to instigate lasting success. Many of Atlantic's final grants, including investments in the ACLU, Center for Community Change, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and Community Catalyst, are intended to better reflect a balance between lasting capacity and policy impact.

"There is constant interplay between what the campaigns need and what's the capacity that we want to have built," added one Atlantic staff person. "Because we know we're going to invest in this for three or four years, then we're going to be gone and these groups have got to be able to keep going. So there's always a tension to who are the core groups who can get this done, and can keep doing it, even when our funding goes away."

¹ The Atlantic Philanthropies is a limited life foundation. Its full endowment will be expended and operations closed permanently by 2020.

What funders can
do differently



3

If you work at or with a funder that routinely falls into the trap of making either/or choices about how to support advocacy, here are five ways to approach your work differently in order to blend capacity building and policy campaign approaches that will better position advocates for the issue fights you care about.

1

Don't let short-term mindsets or arbitrary timelines shape your approach to advocacy. Be more explicit about where your grant support is situated in the longer timeframe needed to achieve a policy goal.

It's not enough for funders to have a vague sense that policy efforts are durable. They must understand more explicitly the timeframes in which advocates expect to be working on a goal, recognize where their grant support fits into that timeframe, and plan for advocates' needs to evolve with respect to both capacity and campaign support.

Some funders account for this by lengthening grant commitments to provide the time and space needed to adapt to policy shifts and political context. For example, The Atlantic Philanthropies committed long-term funding to comprehensive immigration reform with support for both a policy campaign and goal, and the requisite capacities to achieve it. Atlantic signaled to advocates at the outset that their commitment would continue, which helped the campaign to weather initial legislative setbacks. Instead of pulling back after those setbacks, Atlantic and others asked advocates how to move forward. The funders then shifted to supporting communications and mobilization capacity that helped spark the next push for immigration reform. Without attention to both the long-term policy target and the underlying capacities that were necessary to build the field over time, the campaign could have sputtered just a couple years in.

State-based funders, such as the Missouri Foundation for Health and the Colorado Health Foundation, have lengthened grant cycles in recent years to provide more flexibility and adaptive space for advocates to work. Shifting from an annual mindset to a two-, three-, or even five-year period requires strong buy-in from boards and leadership. That doesn't happen overnight. In the case of these two funders, an intentional, deliberative process helped to cultivate support internally – first with staff and grant committees, and then, ultimately, with the board. Field assessments, scenario planning, and incremental internal education all helped demonstrate the value and effectiveness of longer time horizons to provide more space and room for strategies to evolve.

Other models maintain shorter grant cycles, but operate under the umbrella of a concrete, long-term commitment to a broad issue area that still provides continuity. Just because a funder might have a one-year grant cycle doesn't mean their time horizon can only go that far.

Funders for the State Priorities Partnership operate within an annual funding cycle, while also having made a decades-long commitment within a broad issue area. This enables funders and advocates to stay closely connected on policy targets and the capacities needed to move issues. "There's always been a sensitivity to document impact clearly to show in reasonably quantifiable terms what's happened. At the same time, we've got funders who've been in it for years, and in some cases decades, who clearly see the importance of long-term investment," said one funder.

“There’s always been a sensitivity to document impact clearly to show in reasonably quantifiable terms what’s happened. At the same time, we’ve got funders who’ve been in it for years, and in some cases decades, who clearly see the importance of long-term investment.”

PROGRAM OFFICER
AT A NATIONAL FOUNDATION





→ “It’s a simmer and boil strategy. You need to have capacity simmering so you can act when issues are ready to boil over.”

PROGRAM OFFICER
AT A NATIONAL FOUNDATION

Funders that can’t make long-term grants or promises to stick to an issue over time should understand where their support falls within the lifecycle of an issue and an advocacy effort. A “start-up” funder seeding a newer advocacy effort – or a policy issue for which there isn’t yet a strong base of public or political will to build on – should illustrate for the board that the short-term commitment falls at the beginning of a long-term effort, whether the funder itself will stay in it for the long-term or not. Calibrate expectations for progress and outcomes accordingly.

Funders should also be clear about how and where their funding fits with what other funders and advocates are doing. If there is a longer, protracted fight, some funders may have different opportunities to deploy resources in a complementary fashion, such as supporting capacity needs in early stages, or more targeted tactical support in later stages. Clarifying how a grant fits into this larger funder mix will help ensure that the advocate’s funding streams supply what it needs to make progress.

2

Don’t be passive about your role within the field. Deeply engage so you can understand the players, funding landscape, and political context. Identify what support advocates need, but aren’t getting. Be expedient in how you make grant-related choices.

Funders need to understand how they fit into the larger funding landscape of a particular policy goal to ensure that advocates have the right mix of funding to build and sustain capacity, and enables them to move policy. Funders also need to empower and equip program officers to operate effectively and efficiently within that space.

Effective foundations consistently rely on program staff for an in-depth understanding of issue areas; a deep knowledge of the policy process and where opportunities are to affect change; strong relationships with grantees and others in the field; and a deep and broad understanding of key players, funders, capacity needs, and organizational readiness.

Understanding the political context is also critical. Regardless of whether a funder is coming from a capacity building perspective or a policy campaign perspective, program staff must be willing to engage in, and talk about, the implications of the political process for the work at hand. Ignoring that context, or avoiding topics of the political process and building power as we have seen many funders do, can handcuff funders and advocates alike.

The Atlantic Philanthropies' support for comprehensive immigration reform and health care reform relied heavily on program officers to identify capacity needs with grantees, as well as moving quickly on policy windows when they opened. The Packard Foundation's support for the Narrative Project grew out of its understanding of the messaging challenges with Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and the need to reshape the debate. And the State Priorities Partnership funders have periodically deployed intensive capacity efforts – around policy analysis, communications support, and organizing capacity – as the issue areas in which advocates work have evolved.

In these examples and others, program officers were deliberate about how they funded, who they funded, how they structured supports for grantees, and what decisions needed to be made and monitored to keep capacity building closely linked to policy goals. Program officers identified key capacity needs or policy windows or both with grantees and advocates.

For foundations with smaller staffs or program officers who do not have the bandwidth to be deeply embedded within a particular field or coalition, close ties can still be maintained through intermediaries, external consultants, or grantees and advocates themselves.

In the case of Atlantic's support for comprehensive immigration reform, the program staff was closely connected to a circle of leading advocates. This "healthy interplay," as described by one program officer, was rooted in formal and informal lines of communications, allowing Atlantic staff to identify opportunities, often with advocates, where their funding or other support could make a difference.

"There were moments in that period when there was recognition that the capacity wasn't there, that groups weren't well organized and weren't working well collaboratively," said one Atlantic staff person. "So [the foundation] pulled people together to address that, and put some resources into reshaping the capacity—particularly around all the organizing and communications capacity."

This close connection to the field allowed program staff to build the case internally for ensuing phases of the campaign, as well as to detect and respond quickly to needs in the field.

Lessons from the immigration reform campaign and other initiatives illustrate the need for program officers to have the tools and mechanisms to respond quickly and act decisively, so as not to miss windows of opportunity or leave past gains vulnerable. If advocates need support for communications and messaging, policy analysis, public opinion research, grassroots organizing support, or any number of other activities, they likely can't afford to wait for the next funding cycle or quarterly board meeting. These kinds of requests require open, direct lines of communications, sound relationships between funders and grantees, and quick action. It's a role that requires program officers to have both external political and policy acumen, and the savvy to effectively and efficiently navigate internal organizational dynamics and processes.

Program officers can also be better positioned if they understand specifically how funding from other sources goes toward supporting advocates' capacity or toward their campaign activities.

If most funders are putting resources behind policy organizations and think tanks, what gaps does that leave in the capacity of grassroots organizations to engage broader, more diverse communities in policy debates? Or, if there is a lot of focus from funders on a specific policy campaign, what gaps might that leave in the readiness of advocates to continue their work beyond a policy win into an implementation phase?

Likewise, where a particular issue or campaign is in its lifecycle can shed light on when to provide what type of support for advocacy efforts. Where strong capacity already exists, funders can look to prioritize support for specific policy campaigns. Such was the case with Kidswell, a national advocacy campaign aimed at successful health reform implementation on behalf of kids. Atlantic chose Kidswell grantees in selected states based on their existing capacity to engage in policy change efforts, as well as on a set of criteria for state policy environments where progress was likely, or mounting a defense was necessary.



"Be wary of the belief that we can achieve change without having a field that is sustainable and permanent, with people on the ground and mobilization. Yes, those will shrink. But the fact that we think we can 'astroturf' create them, then put them away when we don't need them anymore, simply doesn't work, and hasn't worked for quite a long time. I would warn funders in funding those types of ad hoc efforts because it's ultimately a waste of money and resources."

PROGRAM OFFICER
AT A NATIONAL FOUNDATION



“We initially thought we had a pretty strong field, so we thought TA dollars would go elsewhere—but with all the shifts, we saw clearly that we still need to help build some of the capacities while we focus on policy targets.”

PROGRAM OFFICER
AT A STATE-BASED FOUNDATION

Even with a specific focus on policy change, grantees still strengthened or expanded capacities on a number of fronts, including communications and media work, policy analysis, coalition building, and direct engagement with policymakers.²

In contrast, for a policy campaign effort that engages organizations newer to the policy advocacy space, or constituencies less experienced in the types of activities that the work requires, a greater focus on building capacity and skills is warranted. In one state-level example where a push was being made to increase health care access for undocumented immigrants, a coalition supported and trained direct service organizations in how they could play an advocacy role. This worked, in part, because the funder did not mandate how the coalition should go about their advocacy work, but rather gave them the space and flexibility to determine how best to build on the strengths and assets of each group.

Being more closely embedded in, and connected to, a field can also help funders and program staff identify new players and partners to engage in a coalition or network. Rather than relying on funding those groups with proven capacity, or that are known entities already, funders can diversify their support for grassroots and community-based organizations that may not have the same familiar attributes found in professional advocacy circles.

“There’s been a lot of talk recently that viewing communities as transactional elements is not going to fly,” said one advocacy expert. “So how do you build authentic relationships that allow for some of these issues to come in and come out of visibility is something that I think is a big question. How do you do that effectively?”

“Diversifying funding among different groups is important,” added the head of one state-based advocacy group. “As soon as a funder goes to three or four community meetings, they get it immediately. But it takes being in it, and experiencing it – not just hearing about it.”

² Hoag, S., Lipson, D., and Peebles, V. *On the Road to Universal Children’s Health Coverage: An Interim Report on the Kidswell Campaign*. Mathematica Policy Research. May 1, 2015.

3

Don’t structure grants in a static way. Make sure your funding is adaptive and durable enough to evolve with advocates’ capacity needs and the demands of the policymaking process.

Grant structures are vitally important to enable funders and advocates to move on policy change while also building capacity. The importance and value of long-term, core general operating support is well-documented.³ And there’s a general sense that more and more foundations, like the Ford Foundation and others, are moving more aggressively to provide large, multi-year, unrestricted grants.⁴ Foundations moving to expand general operating support for advocacy grantees and others should be applauded. But that’s only part of the equation.

General operating support alone does not guarantee policy wins or lasting, sustainable change. It also remains the exception, with only 23% of all U.S. grantmaking dollars specified as general operating support.⁵

Many foundations are exploring blended models for grant structures that help provide advocates with both the continuity and flexibility needed in policy and advocacy efforts.

One type of structure is pairing general operating support with additional targeted support for specific purposes. In some cases, the targeted support aims to address a specific type of need or fulfill a particular capacity gap as it arises, such as communications support, policy research, or outreach and organizing capacity.

³ Jagpal, Niki and Laskowski, Kevin. *The State of General Operating Support*. National Center for Responsive Philanthropy. 2012.

⁴ Buchanan, Phil. *Big Issues, Many Questions: An Essay on the Pressing Issues Facing U.S. Foundation Leaders and Boards*. The Center for Effective Philanthropy. 2016.

⁵ *Key Facts on U.S. Foundations*, Foundation Center, 2014.



FUNDING

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→ “There’s been a lot of talk recently that viewing communities as transactional elements is not going to fly. So how do you build authentic relationships that allow for some of these issues to come in and come out of visibility is something that I think is a big question. How do you do that effectively?”

ADVOCACY EXPERT

The Colorado Health Foundation revamped its advocacy grantmaking to pair general operating support with highly-targeted, rapid response grants to quickly address an emergent need, such as public opinion research, messaging support, or additional communications capacity for advocates. The State Priorities Partnership has used a similar mechanism to help with policymaker engagement, polling, and policy analysis. Another state-based foundation experimented with a two-week turnaround time for rapid response requests from its advocacy groups, requiring a streamlined foundation decision-making process.

Another model that many funders have used, including The Atlantic Philanthropies, is program- or project-oriented grants that still provide flexibility to make mid-course corrections, adapt strategies and tactics, leverage new or emergent windows of opportunity, and avoid rigid planning that constrains advocates. This model can include resources for targeted technical assistance, grantee training and coaching, or organizational development, explicitly tied to advocates’ work on policy issues.

4

Don’t just look at either capacity or policy results when considering evaluation approaches. Frame dual goals and outcomes upfront for your board that relate to both increased capacity and to policy progress on a realistic timeline.

Assessing what happened as a result of advocacy capacity building efforts outside the context of policy campaign goals can be difficult. It can be challenging for boards to understand what funders “got for the money.”

Being overly oriented to one approach or the other can also lead to not understanding what was learned or gained. On the other hand, for ongoing capacity-related efforts, there are also challenges when there are no victory points to declare, or clear milestones to celebrate. There can be burnout among funders and advocates embedded in ongoing capacity building approaches. Or, some capacity building efforts are so broad and vague that it enables contribution – or even credit – to be claimed for virtually any outcome.

When the capacity aims and policy goals are more closely connected and integrated, a clearer picture emerges about what happened, why, what was learned from it, and the work that still remains.



In the context of Atlantic’s support for comprehensive immigration reform, having a clearer connection between advocacy and capacity enabled the evaluation to better capture what occurred, what was learned, and what aspects of the strategy and capacity lasted beyond the grants. In this case, although the primary policy objective wasn’t met, the strategy itself helped to develop and strengthen the communications capacity of the immigration reform movement, and redirect and broaden other campaign infrastructure – such as list-building and organizing capacity – from a specific policy target to a field focus.

That said, while the policy aims were clear in the immigration reform effort, there wasn’t always an equally clear understanding about where the field was strong and what capacities were, in fact, needed. Particularly early on, the initiative could have benefited from a deeper, more intentional assessment of the communications, leadership, relationship, and adaptive capacities of the field.

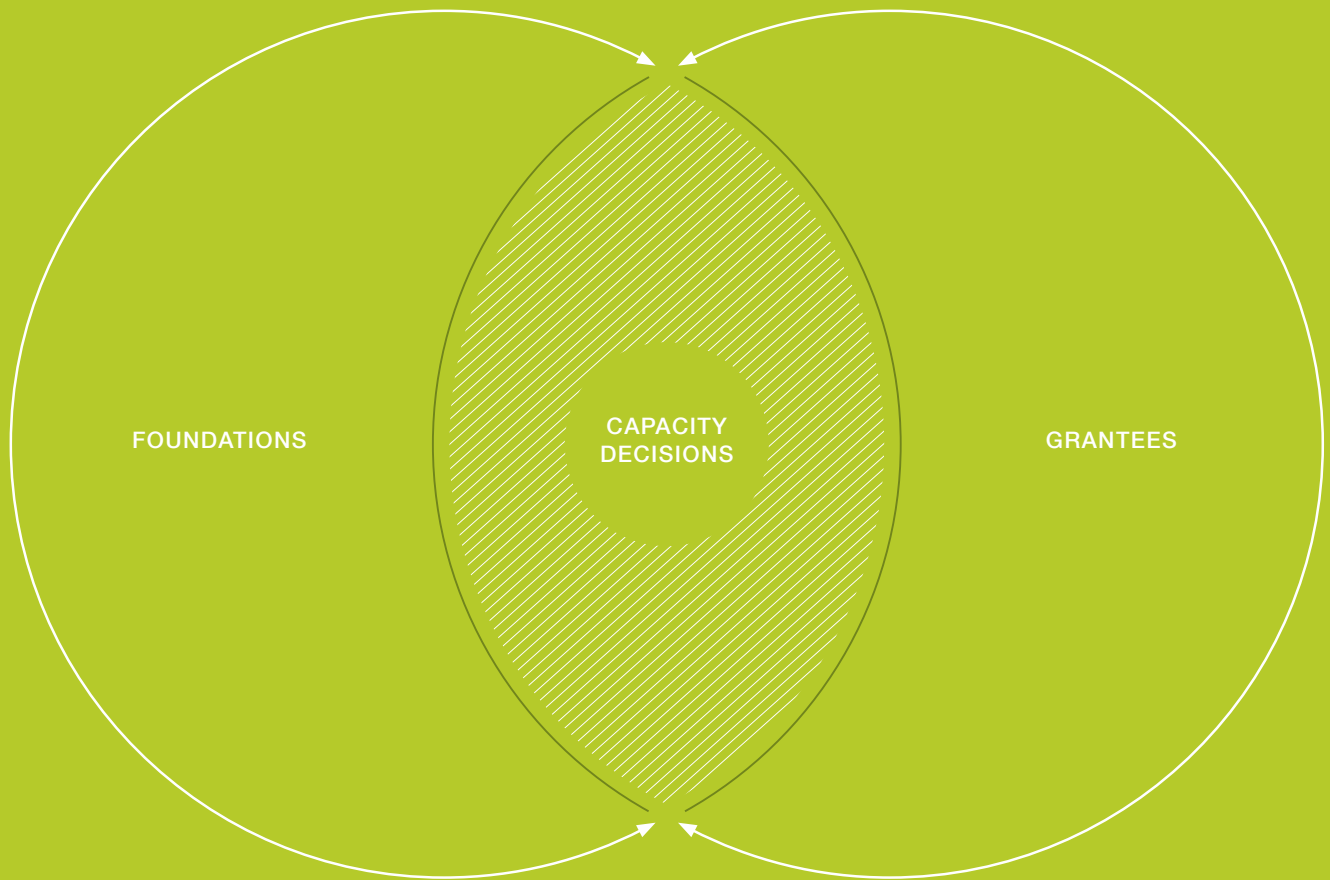
The work of the State Priorities Partnership was originally more narrowly focused on policy analysis, and the belief that if they “put good information out into the world, more good will happen.” But funders eventually understood that they needed to support a broader set of capacities, such as communications, educating policymakers, organizing, and others, to achieve what they wanted. They recognized that advocates needed more tools in their toolkits to move the policy needle.

And even though the Kidswell campaign was explicitly aimed at policy change, the framing of the evaluation helped capture lessons learned about capacity. Connecting state-based health advocates with national advocacy organizations helped strengthen and expand capacities in the state groups, particularly related to communications, social media, policy analysis, and legal advocacy. As well, the focus of the overall strategy on direct engagement with policymakers helped strengthen that aspect of advocates’ efforts, and demonstrated the value and effectiveness of those types of activities.

These examples point to the need for evaluation and learning to assess both capacity and policy progress, and to frame those dual goals at the outset. Even if a funder is focused on capacity building, the evaluation should focus on understanding whether and how new capacities materialized that enabled progress on policy goals. Policy campaign funders should focus on whether the practice of engaging in policy campaign activities translates into lasting capacities that can be applied to other work.

“We are best able to see success in terms of strong capacity when we’re working with grantees on a specific issue. Otherwise, it’s too hard to get our heads around why this capacity is needed. It’s hard for me to imagine giving a capacity grant without a clear understanding of ‘*Okay, if we give you this grant, it’s going to allow you to move the needle in some way, shape, or form on what issues.*’”

PROGRAM OFFICER AT A NATIONAL FOUNDATION



5

Don't just guess what capacity needs exist, or fund them separately from advocacy work. Make capacity decisions with advocates, and build on them over time.

How foundations choose the types of capacities to support is as important as what those choices actually are. Foundations sometimes select capacities to support without input from advocates. Capacity needs and approaches to build them have to be identified, developed, and supported in consultation with grantees.

These challenges arise in part because funders and advocates think about capacity building differently. Funders often make a distinction between supporting capacity building or policy advocacy. Advocates, in contrast, build capacity by doing the work and advancing their mission. When capacity sticks, it's usually because there was an opportunity for advocates to put skills to use in a real way.

Likewise, capacity building can be better sustained when it's rooted in relationship building, leadership development, mobilizing communities, building power over time, and building on what was learned in each successive campaign or action – some of the tenets of community organizing and movement building.

In both the Narrative and Finish Line projects, strengthening communications capacity was a central component of the strategy itself. Self-selected, grantee-driven learning collaboratives were established among state-based groups. Messaging, coaching, and training support was iterative, and evolved differently in different states. Capacity needs and policy goals were closely linked throughout the multi-year initiatives, which provided time to accumulate knowledge, skills, and tools that stuck – and that were used in other policy efforts, like leading up to the Affordable Care Act.

Advocates build capacity by doing and testing new capacities in the field, and then reflecting on how they worked and whether they could be applied differently or more effectively in future efforts. Capacity building is more powerful if it is linked to the work advocates are actually doing.

Additionally, working with advocates to identify capacity needs can also enable funders to make better-informed choices about grantee selection and engaging more diverse organizations. Some foundations fall into the trap of exclusively funding groups that already have high levels of advocacy capacity, or that the foundation has worked with before. Such choices create haves and have-nots within a field, and, without a funder even realizing it, can create barriers for a more diverse array of constituencies to engage in a policy or issue fight.

In the eyes of some advocates – and despite its many successes – the national campaign model employed by Atlantic for comprehensive immigration reform amounted to picking sides and monopolizing power within the movement. “Long lasting power and infrastructure is really developed locally,” said one advocate. “But often what it feels like is these [national] groups helicopter in and tell us what to do, then leave. There becomes a reputation that people come in, give a ton of money, and then they're gone after their pilot project is done.”

In some cases, the very groups that can be marginalized by funder choices or disadvantaged by conventional measures of readiness and capacity⁶—such as grassroots coalitions, constituency-based groups, or community-based organizations—are themselves able to wield enormous power and influence across different communities.

⁶ Inouye, T. and Estrella R. *Evaluation of the Capacity Building for Minority-Led Organizations Project*. Social Policy Research Associates. January 18, 2012.

The takeaway for funders going forward



Henry Ford once said, *“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you always got.”*



If you’ve always funded capacity building with little or no attention to policy campaigns and the broader political context, or if you’ve always strictly focused on policy wins with little or no attention to organizational or field capacity, you are likely getting what you always got. That could mean robust capacity building that doesn’t quite stick, that quickly fades after a grant ends, or that doesn’t yield any tangible policy results. Or it might mean getting that policy win only to see it lost a year or two later after an unfavorable election, and having to re-up for the same fight all over again.

Half measures result in actions that only achieve part of what was intended. This is exactly the predicament in which too many foundations find themselves. And it doesn’t have to be that way.

The nature of policy fights today and the modern political context require different kinds of approaches that do not limit philanthropy to binary, static, either/or choices. Rather, foundations have to be more holistic, intentional, aggressive, and adaptive – both in their own approach to advocacy support, and in how they equip and resource advocates to do their work effectively.

It’s not sufficient for foundations to continually “get ready” for engagement in policy change efforts, only to turn their heads to the next “shiny new thing” that comes around. They have to stay ready, and be clear-eyed about the constancy and the fluidity of the policymaking process. Likewise, it’s not sufficient for foundations to pursue capacity building efforts unmoored from any specific policy area, only to risk missing near-term opportunities or having capacities not take hold within an organization or field. Funders have to stay focused, and be clear and specific in how they can play an effective role in policy change, and best support advocates, too.

As the policy and political environment continues to shift and high-stakes opportunities take shape for philanthropy to exert its influence, foundations should not limit themselves to half measures when going the whole way can lead to lasting impact.

Acknowledgements

INTERVIEWS

In addition to a review of relevant publications from the field, select evaluation reports, and Atlantic grant documents, the research for this brief consisted of a range of interviews with foundation staff, advocates, evaluators, and other experts whose experiences and expertise provided perspectives and context.

Interview participants included:

Ryan Barker, Missouri Foundation for Health
Gigi Barsoum, Independent Consultant
Carol Hedges, Colorado Fiscal Institute
Sheila Hoag, Mathematica
Nick Johnson,
 Center on Budget & Policy Priorities
Gene Lewit, Packard Foundation (former)
Kavitha Mediratta, The Atlantic Philanthropies
Steve McConnell,
 The Atlantic Philanthropies (former)
Johanna Morariu, Innovation Network
Jared Raynor, TCC Group
Jean Ross, Ford Foundation
Aaron Smith, Young Invincibles
Erica Snow and Brenda Sears,
 Colorado Health Foundation
Ashlin Spinden Malouf, Sacramento ACT
Ed Walz,
 Springboard Partners (formerly of First Focus)

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Kimberley Chin
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Eric Ward

CREDITS

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Thank you

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At the Center for Evaluation Innovation our aim is to push philanthropic and nonprofit evaluation practice in new directions and into new arenas. We specialize in areas that are challenging to assess, such as advocacy and systems change.



THE ATLAS LEARNING PROJECT

The Atlas Learning Project is a three-year effort coordinated by the Center for Evaluation Innovation to synthesize and strategically communicate lessons from the advocacy and policy change efforts that The Atlantic Philanthropies and other funders have supported in the U.S. The project's goal is to help push philanthropy and advocacy in bolder and more effective directions.



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