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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The intermediary roles of foundations in the policy process: building coalitions of interest

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Abstract The role of philanthropic foundations in the policy process is largely hidden and thus significantly under conceptualized. In this paper, we argue that several key characteristics of foundations serve as advantages for them to play an intermediary role in different stages of the policy process. By leveraging their independent resources, credibility, and strategic giving, they are able to build coalitions of interest to advance and secure preferred policy alternatives through agenda setting, policy diffusion, and coordinating implementation efforts. We provide evidence for this intermediary role through two qualitative case studies, (1) the Pew Charitable Trust's efforts to promote universal pre-kindergarten, 2002–2012, and (2) multiple foundations' role in supporting extended foster care in California, 2008–2012. In both cases, we find that foundations wielded significant political power within policy communities by serving as central hubs of information, facilitating coordinated action, incentivizing action, and connecting diverse actors. This allows them to play a crucial, yet veiled, role in attempts to advance policy change. This phenomenon may be welcomed for supporting evidence-based policymaking and capacity building, but is troubling in regards to transparency and accountability.

Keywords Foundations · Intermediary · Policy diffusion · Policy implementation · Child welfare · Pre-kindergarten

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Introduction

Philanthropic foundations, known for their charitable grants, also identify as investors, institution builders, and social innovators (Hammack and Anheier 2010; Reich et al. 2016). While evidence of those roles is plentiful, what is often missed is the degree to which those latter roles are similar to the activity of interest groups (Clemens 1997; Berry and Wilcox 2018). Because private foundations are self-financed (like many industry-sponsored interest groups), they have unique degrees of freedom to pursue their own interests. Recently, evidence has grown to show that foundations, especially larger, more influential foundations, do not play primarily charitable roles, but rather envision themselves and their funding as seeding social innovations (Bushouse 2009; Mosley and Galaskiewicz 2015; Reckhow 2013; Tompkins-Stange 2016). Much of this research focuses on how foundations build support for specific innovations (e.g., often using pilot programs) and then actively work to bring them to scale so they can be adopted by governments.

In this paper, we expand on this literature by following the actions of foundations across the policy process, demonstrating how foundations serve as 'intermediaries' that can wield significant political power by serving as central nodes in policy communities. Specifically, we show how foundations create giving programs to advance their preferred policy frame and then build interest group coalitions to elevate selected policy alternatives onto the governmental agenda, diffuse them across policy contexts, and ensure they are implemented in a way that is aligned with their preferences. If interest groups are 'organizations that try to influence government' (Berry and Wilcox 2018; Berry and Goss, this volume), our data show that foundations are clearly playing that role through their work as intermediaries. Accordingly, we argue that foundations' intermediary role needs to be incorporated into public policy theories and frameworks.

First, we show how foundations attempt to influence agenda setting by funding networks of ground-level advocates to promote specific frames and policy alternatives. Our research provides empirical evidence that foundations often work more closely with those advocates than is commonly understood. Foundation grants do more than simply channel activity, however, as intermediaries they also help to shape ideological norms within policy communities, with far-reaching consequences for framing problems and advancing policy alternatives. Second, we show how foundations diffuse their preferred policy horizontally across states and local governments as well as vertically from state to local government. As intermediaries, foundations serve as the 'go-betweens' linking policies from one political environment to another, connecting actors, and facilitating uptake. Third, given their ideological and financial stakes in the policy alternative, when their preferred policy alternatives are finally adopted, foundations again work as intermediaries, attempting to influence the implementation process by bringing together like-minded stakeholders so that policies are carried out in a way that is true to their vision. In this paper, we show how this role may be growing as implementing government agencies lose capacity in the 'hollow state' (Milward and Provan 2000). Ultimately, from problem definition to rulemaking, foundations can exercise substantial control over what

eventual policy products will look like by funding coalitions of actors who engage at all phases of the policy process.

In our first case, we show how the Pew Charitable Trusts created coalitions of interest by funding networks of actors to adopt a shared policy frame around universal pre-kindergarten (UPK). The idea was to split 3- and 4-year-olds from birth to 2-year-olds in order to reframe child care as education. In addition to funding advocacy organizations, they also provided grants to a wide array of other interests to elevate their frame ('invest in preschool-age children to improve educational outcomes') and to support their preferred policy alternative (UPK), such as funding media coverage, research, advocacy, and presentations to national membership organizations of public officials. Pew then funded organizations that elevated the UPK policy alternative within states, while funding a national web of research and advocacy entities to serve as 'go-betweens' to diffuse Pew's policy alternative across states. Pew's policy campaign fueled what has become known as the Universal Pre-K Movement. In this analysis, we show how Pew became a central intermediary in building coalitions of interest that were effective in promoting its frame and preferred policy alternative.

In our second case, we turn to how foundations' financial self-reliance allows them to have unique influence throughout the policy process. Through long-term investments in policy domains, foundations can develop significant authority to make claims about what works with a high level of technical detail and also can help fund advocates' participation in crucial 'advisory boards' or 'stakeholder panels' that play an outsized role in how policy eventually functions on the ground. In 2010, advocates in California, funded by a coalition of foundations, secured a long-held legislative goal of extending foster care to age 21. The coalition also worked to influence the regulatory process by funding legal advocates and consultants to staff rule-setting committees. A lack of capacity in state agencies due to the hollowing out of the state meant that those foundation-funded legal advocates were often the most experienced professionals in the room and they succeeded in establishing policy that was far more generous than policymakers likely intended. Foundations also funded processes that facilitated within-state policy diffusion of the new rules to state agencies, the courts, and 58 county-administered child welfare systems. Ultimately, by creating a similar 'web' as described in the Pew case, the California foundations acted as intermediaries to connect disparate entities (e.g., researchers and advocates), thereby building advocacy capacity throughout the policy process.

Both cases focus on the development and implementation of child and family policy and draw on extensive interviews with diverse stakeholders, as well as observational data and document and webpage analysis. As it is based on case studies, this analysis is theory generating rather than testing, but combined, these cases demonstrate how, when foundations invest heavily in specific policy alternatives, they can become central hubs of authority for bringing together researchers, advocates, and professional associations of practitioners to advocate for their preferred policies.

Foundations in the policy process

Foundations are nonprofit organizations, governed by Internal Revenue Service rules for 501(c)3 organizations, but are prohibited from participating in direct and grassroots lobbying for or against legislation (IRS 2017; see Thomas 2002 for reader-friendly version).[1] This makes them unusual as interest groups. However, foundations are allowed to build relationships with elected officials, share information on activities and grants, provide technical assistance to legislative bodies or committees, and to provide nonpartisan analysis, study, or research. They can also fund other groups to carry out these and other advocacy activities.

Thus, despite the restriction on lobbying, foundations have considerable leeway to function as political actors and research has shown that they have a rich history of doing so. For example, foundations have been shown to shape political activity and outcomes through their engagement with social movements. This includes financing of specific players in order to channel social movement activity in support of more moderate goals (such as in the Civil Rights Movement) as well as strategically enrolling advocates in the building of new fields, associated with new policy goals (such as in the environmental movement) (McAdam 1982; Jenkins 1998; McCarthy 2004; Bartley 2007). Similarly, Goss (2007) has shown that foundations can play a critical role in legitimizing identity groups and their new political claims (such as in the women's movement) and more recent work by Reckhow (2013) and Tomkins-Stange (2016) demonstrates how large foundations have pushed for specific types of educational reforms through concentrated giving.

The intermediary roles played by private foundations

In this paper, we attempt to rectify the undertheorizing of foundations' role in the policy process by conceptualizing how foundations attempt to elevate problem frames onto the agenda and facilitate coordinated action to advance their preferred policy alternative through policy diffusion and implementation. We argue that one of the key ways in which foundations intervene in the policy process is through their activity as *intermediaries*. The concepts of 'go-betweens' and 'intermediaries' are used interchangeably across the literature but are generally used to refer to a wide range of organizations that transport ideas between different parties, disseminate information, form connections between disparate actors, and also work as policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom 2000). Douglas et al. (2015, pg. 489) define go-betweens as 'actors who work across multiple jurisdictions.' Gandara et al. (2017, pg. 702) define intermediaries as 'boundary-spanning groups that provide a translating function between principals with different values and perspectives.' In this paper, we argue that foundations can and do play this role of intermediary in the policy process, as their work takes place at multiple levels but often goes unseen because the funded organizations are given credit.

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[1] Foundations are allowed to lobby if the legislation directly affects the foundations' existence.
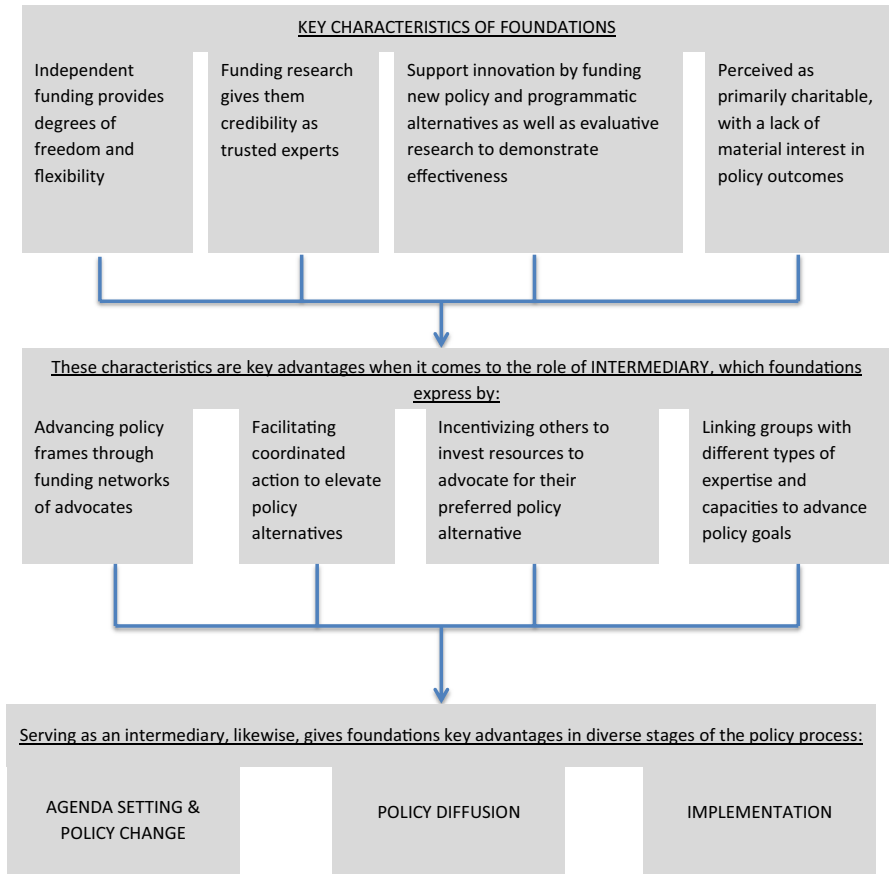
Fig. 1 Role of foundations in the policy process

In Fig. 1, we present a theoretical framework that links the key characteristics of foundations to their intermediary roles throughout the policy process. At the top of the figure, we detail four defining characteristics of foundations that well-position them to serve as intermediaries in the policy process. First, their independent sources of funding provide them degrees of freedom and flexibility to follow their own interests. Second, their history of funding research gives them credibility as trusted experts, allowing them to 'stay above the fray' and seem ideologically neutral even when pushing for particular policy alternatives. Third, this is bolstered by foundations' support of innovation through the funding and evaluation of new policy and programmatic alternatives to demonstrate effectiveness. Finally, they are perceived as primarily charitable, with a lack of material interest in policy outcomes.

We argue that each of these characteristics helps position foundations as key intermediaries at different moments in the policy process: agenda setting and policy change, policy diffusion, and implementation. Our research explores how this may

play out in these processes, which we introduce in the sections below, and provide support for in the empirical cases that follow.

Foundations as intermediaries in agenda setting and policy change

Despite significant research showing that foundations can and do play important roles in facilitating and channeling agenda setting and policy change efforts (Jenkins 1998; Goss 2007; Bartley 2007; Reckhow 2013; Tompkins-Stange 2016), theories of the policy process have yet to explicitly incorporate them. For example, in the Multiple Streams framework (Kingdon 1995) empirical applications and theoretical advances have yet to include foundations as policy entrepreneurs (Jones et al. 2016; Cairney and Jones 2016). Research utilizing the Punctuated Equilibrium Model has not yet incorporated the role of foundations into their key concepts (e.g., contributing to positive policy images, choices of venue, or the stabilization of new policy monopolies) (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner et al. 2017), nor has Advocacy Coalition Framework research conceptualized the role of foundations in the coalitions of actors advocating for policy change (Jenkins-Smith et al. 1991, 2017).

We argue that this oversight may be because foundations participate as somewhat hidden actors in what we refer to as 'coalitions of interest.' Foundations use their independent funding to build coalitions of interested actors who share their policy beliefs and fund coordinated activity to advance those beliefs in the agenda setting and policy change process. These actors include both researchers and advocates, and foundation funding can be used to provide key evidence as well as infrastructure support. Thus, by serving as an intermediary, foundations can provide the glue for coalitions of interest with a shared policy change goal. In this way, they can serve as important policy entrepreneurs who help to couple problem and policy streams, contribute funding to advocates who share their policy beliefs, and are deeply involved with policy change processes that can lead to shifts in policy monopolies.

Foundations as intermediaries in the policy diffusion process

Policy diffusion, the dissemination and adoption of policy innovations across governments (local, state, national), is an integral part of the policy process (Berry 1994; Graham et al. 2013). In order for a policy to be diffused, it must first be *discovered* by policymakers, *assessed* for its suitability, and finally, *adopted* by the government (Karch 2007; Rogers 2003). Due to its complexity, a wide variety of actors and interest groups are typically involved. Although much research on policy diffusion is focused on the decision-making process within the adopting government (so-called internal actors), as far back as Walker's (1969) seminal work in this area, there has also been interest in the role of interest groups in pushing diffusion (Berry 1994). Indeed, Shipan and Volden (2012, pg. 788) argue that 'understanding policy diffusion is crucial to understanding policy advocacy and policy change more broadly.' But what is missing is the question of who is funding and leading the diffusion.

When investigating the role of external actors in policy diffusion, research has recently uncovered substantial evidence for the important role of intermediaries (or

'go-betweens') in facilitating policy uptake (Douglas et al. 2015; Shipan and Volden 2012; Graham et al. 2013). Foundations are well situated to play this role. We argue in this paper that because they are financially independent, invest heavily in innovation and research, and lack obvious material interest in specific outcomes, they tend to be trusted partners of diverse actors. This gives them a clear advantage when it comes to sharing information, particularly information that is perceived as high quality, which can incentivize action (including adoption) and call attention to new problems. These advantages are, in turn, vital in the policy diffusion process. They may be particularly important in helping foundations play a role in diffusing policy across and within states, because state policy communities are typically smaller than what is found at the national level, and more open to influence by intermediaries such as foundations which can provide support.

Foundations as intermediaries in the implementation process

The work of foundations in policy implementation is perhaps the least visible of their roles in the policy process. The policy implementation literature was built on work showing how implementation outcomes often do not meet the expectations of policy formulators (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984) and for many years was consumed by a debate regarding the relative merits of 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' implementation approaches (DeLeon and DeLeon 2002; Matland 1995). Foundations sidestep that type of categorization and, we argue, serve as intermediaries in ways that bridge top-down and bottom-up approaches. Specifically, foundations with long-standing interests in specific policies serve as sources of expert knowledge themselves, facilitating the implementation process through their roles as conveners, catalysts, and mobilizers. They provide technical assistance, host events, facilitate communication, and incentivize specific forms of action at both the elite and grassroots levels, all in support of their vision of what policy should look like on the ground.

In this paper, we focus on how the hollowing out of the state enhances foundations' role in helping to shape the implementation of any given policy (Milward and Provan 2000). This hollowing out is generally attributed to the growth of third party contractors to carry out much of the state's business. With ground-level implementers more likely to be private agencies (and potentially already working in coordination with key foundations), government agencies have lost expertise and staff capacity. Terry (2005) calls this the 'thinning of the administrative state.' This has lessened the ability of many state and federal agencies to implement policy in a 'command and control' fashion and created opportunities for other actors—such as foundations—to wield influence.

A prime example of where foundations may intervene as intermediaries in the implementation process is through the collaborative governance processes that are now crucially important in both regulation setting and implementation oversight (Ansell and Gash 2007). These processes are designed to bring in multiple outside stakeholders and provide them with opportunities for voice—but are vulnerable to outsized influence by stakeholders with significant power, resources, or authority,

such as foundations (Purdy 2012). Foundations are particularly well-suited to capitalize on gaps in the capacity and capability of state agencies because they are seen as without material interest and are armed with considerable expertise and assets. Additionally, by operating as central nodes that connect many of the other stakeholders involved, they are positioned to coordinate action and activity in ways that advance particular policy goals.

Methods

This study is a comparative case analysis of two foundation-led efforts to advance policy change. The cases reflect independent research projects, carried out without knowledge of the other. Thus, research questions and methods overlap but have some variation. When comparing notes after completion of the research, the authors realized the similarities between the research aims and findings. Overall, this independence increases confidence in our findings.

Universal pre-kindergarten across the states

In order to understand the complex strategy the Pew Charitable Trusts employed to advance UPK, a giving program that spanned 2002–2012, we reviewed archival documents and IRS 990 forms for grant activity. To augment the 990 data, we utilized a web-based backward mapping of grant acknowledgements. Because every organization thanks its funders, this approach provided a far more complete view of Pew's UPK giving program because we could identify presentations and publications funded by Pew (or through Pew-funded organizations). Between 2005 and 2006, semi-structured interviews were held in person and by phone with the Pew program director and primary Pew-funded research and advocacy entities ($n=5$). The interview questions focused on understanding the design and implementation of the Pew giving program. For the purposes of this paper, we include the experiences of three states that received Pew investment (Illinois, Tennessee, New York). In each state, we reviewed government documents, media coverage, utilized backward mapping, and conducted semi-structured interviews in 2007–2008 to understand the policy change process and the role of Pew funding. Our selection of participants was purposive; interviewees (about 10 in each state) were selected based on their closeness to the process and the role they played (e.g., state agency personnel responsible for administering early education programs, elected officials, advocacy organizations and their funders, and journalists who covered the UPK policy change processes). Attempts were made to interview all parties who played a role in the process; some of these individuals were pre-identified and some were contacted after we learned of their role from other interviews. The multi-method approach allowed for triangulation of information to provide confidence in findings. The case study reported here is part of a broader study of the UPK movement (see Bushouse 2009).

Extended foster care in California

In order to understand the central role foundations played in the adoption and implementation of extended foster care in California, a process that lasted from 2008 to 2012, we carried out participant observation at stakeholder and implementation planning meetings across the state as well as 38 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. These interviews were held in person and over the phone from 2010 to 2012 and lasted from 40 min to 2.5 h. Those interviewed included foundation executives ($N=4$), foundation-funded advocates ($N=12$), state legislators and legislative staff ($N=6$), state and county administrators ($N=11$), and judges and judicial staff ($N=5$). Our sample was purposive; interviewees were selected based on their closeness to the process and the role they played (e.g., cosponsor of legislation, head of state or county agency). Attempts were made to interview all parties who played a role in the process; some of these individuals were pre-identified and some were contacted after we learned of their role in other interviews. Representatives from all organizations that cosponsored the legislation were interviewed as well as legislative staff from both the Democratic and Republican parties, and leaders of the implementation planning group. Interviews were carried out until data saturation was reached, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Data presented here are part of a larger study of the efforts of advocates in California to extend foster care to age 21 (see Mosley and Gibson 2017 and Mosley and Courtney 2012).

Case #1: the Pew Charitable Trusts' universal pre-kindergarten giving program

In the 1990s, the board of the Pew Charitable Trusts shifted to a results-oriented philanthropy, focusing on a few key issues in which they thought they could make a measurable difference. As part of this new approach to philanthropy, in 2001, Pew shifted its K-12 education giving program to focus exclusively on preschool-age children. Its goal was 'to fundamentally change the way this country invests in education for its 3- and 4-year-olds' (Pew Charitable Trusts 2007, 27). The objective was to reframe early education as important for improving educational outcomes (and ultimately economic development) and to use this frame to advocate for state-funded, universal pre-kindergarten. As we will show, over the next 10 years, Pew developed a web of funded actors that elevated and diffused the UPK policy alternative across the country.[2]

Two aspects of this giving program are particularly important in light of the policymaking process. The first is that Pew chose to invest its resources in a particular

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[2] On January 1, 2004, the Pew Charitable Trusts changed its legal status from a private foundation to a public charity. It was able to do this because there were seven separate trusts providing funding to Pew, which, as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) agreed, thus passed the public-support test for public charities. By changing its legal tax status to a public charity, Pew can now directly advocate for its policy agenda.

policy alternative: universal pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds. The shift to funding UPK came about due to three main factors. First, there was scientific evidence from longitudinal studies on the importance of early brain development. Second, data indicated that up to 80% of 4-year-olds were already in an out-of-home placement, some in questionable quality settings. Third, polls indicated that the public was comfortable with 3- and 4-year-olds in out-of-home care but not 2-year-olds or infants. UPK was also attractive because there were no entrenched interests already formed to oppose it.[3] Pew chose UPK because it had the potential to deliver results and then invested its resources to create a movement toward policy change.

The second aspect of the giving program that is important to note is that the strategy Pew developed in concert with its grantees was to effect policy change primarily at the state level. Originally, Pew also had a federal policy strategy, but it quickly became mired in complicated politics related to the federal preschool program Head Start. This led to the decision to focus on state-level change where the array of actors is smaller and more manageable. To advance its stated policy change goal, Pew funded a strategic web of interconnected entities to elevate UPK and diffuse it across states. The strategic web included: two primary research and advocacy organizations; a range of interest groups including business, media, law enforcement, and courts; and professional associations of education officials and elected leadership.

Funding research and advocacy

Pew's primary outlet for advancing research in this area was its funding of The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). The Director of NIEER, Dr. W. Steven Barnett, had been involved with creating the new initiative at Pew and is a well-known early childhood researcher through his involvement with the Perry Preschool study (from which came the heavily used finding that every dollar invested in quality preschool generates seven dollars in savings) (Barnett 1996, 118). NIEER used the Pew funding for its own research and also to sponsor research by others. These research findings provided the basis from which to make policy recommendations, support technical assistance to states, and, perhaps most importantly, reduce policymakers' uncertainty about investing in UPK.

With NIEER responsible for research, Pew set up the advocacy dimension of the initiative by creating a new entity, Pre-K Now, as a project of the nonprofit Institute for Educational Leadership. This provided an arms-length distance from Pew, even though Pre-K Now received approximately 90% of its funds from Pew.[4] The choice of Pre-K Now for the organizational title was intended to advance Pew's frame from child care, which previously had a birth-to-five focus, to only include preschool education for 3- and 4-year-olds. With the creation of Pre-K Now, Pew's UPK strategy entered into a new phase of activism. Pre-K Now was run like an issue campaign, with intensely focused staff with a very clear mission to advance change at the state

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[3] Susan Urahn, Pew Charitable Trusts, telephone communication, November 9, 2005.

[4] Libby Doggett, Pre-K Now, personal communication, Washington, D.C., June 20, 2006.

level within a 10-year giving program. The main criteria for Pre-K Now investment were (1) alignment with the UPK frame, (2) political leadership, and (3) the willingness of state advocates to advance UPK. State advocacy assistance came in an array of forms including the creation of a 'big tent' under which advocates could rally, hiring public relations firms to create sophisticated marketing and e-communications packages. It is important to note that Pew was not investing to create a new movement where none existed but rather to take advantage of political opportunities by increasing the capacity of advocacy actors and strengthening policy communities. The UPK program fit well with Pew's strategy of investing where the opportunity for change is most likely to be successful.

Universal pre-k diffusion within states

Pre-K Now funded coalition building within states and worked to publicize state pre-k programs to other states. Pre-K Now also solicited 'earned' media through education of journalists (see discussion of Hechinger Institute below), writing opinion editorials and letters to the editor, meeting with editorial boards, suggesting story ideas to reporters, and organizing press conferences to release new policy research. Pre-K Now arranged bimonthly phone calls with all of Pew's grantees, facilitated networking meetings to promote cross-state dialog, hosted a national call series (*In Focus*) featuring conversations with high profile actors on topics relevant to the cause, and arranged satellite conferences.[5]

Pre-K Now monitored activity in all 50 states and provided funds, technical assistance, or facilitated networking among policy actors and advocates in nearly every state. Pew-funded grantees then helped to create political momentum with state actors who shared the same goal: expanding universal access to publicly funded pre-kindergarten. An example of Pre-K Now's strategy is the report 'Leadership Matters: Governors' Pre-K Proposals', in which it assessed governors' budgetary proposals and State of the State addresses for their commitment to pre-k. In fiscal year 2006, 20 governors recommended increased spending for pre-k, three recommended decreased spending, and nine states did not have a pre-k program (Scott 2005). For fiscal year 2008, 29 governors proposed spending increases, no governors recommended decreased spending, and only eight states did not have a pre-k program. While Pre-K Now funding cannot be directly linked to the decisions of all those governors, it raised the profile of the issue substantially.

Pew, NIEER, and Pre-K Now worked closely to 'stay on message' to address the changing needs of the pre-k policy environment. If Pre-K Now identified a research need, it was conveyed to NIEER. If NIEER decided to undertake a new research project, it would coordinate with Pew and Pre-K Now to maximize its impact. While Pew and Pre-K Now did not influence or weigh in on NIEER's research findings, the tight interlocking relationships between Pew, NIEER, and Pre-K Now formed the core of the UPK strategy.

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[5] Libby Doggett, Pre-K Now, personal communication, Washington, D.C., June 20, 2006; Stephanie Rubin, Pre-K Now, telephone communication, Washington, D.C., June 28, 2006.

Pew also used a variety of 'strategic partnerships' designed to leverage advocacy voices among important policy interests, the media, and early childhood advocates. A key strategic early move was to gain support of the business community to aid in the reframing of pre-k as a worthy public investment that would ultimately improve state economic outcomes. For example, as early as the mid-1980s the Committee for Economic Development (CED), a business think tank, began advocating for investing in children as an economic development strategy. In 2006, Pew's relationship resulted in CED issuing a Pew-funded report championing the economic promise of pre-k programs (Committee for Economic Development 2006). With this strategic alliance, Pew successfully expanded the set of actors promoting UPK to include at least part of the business sector. Pew also partnered with the law enforcement nonprofit Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (FCIK) to 'build a cadre of their members who will help educate state and federal policymakers on the importance of high-quality pre-k education and its strong link to reducing criminal behavior in juveniles and adults' (Pew Charitable Trusts 2005a). For example, Pew provided a grant to FCIK to publish a report and create outreach that FCIK used to combat proposed cuts to New York's UPK program by the Pataki Administration (FCIK New York 2003). Paired with Pre-K Now investments in individual states, Pew's role as an intermediary built strategic partnerships to elevate UPK onto state governmental agendas.[6]

Universal pre-k diffusion across states

The strategic role Pew played as intermediary within states was supported by a national-level strategy to diffuse UPK *across* states that included funding for training journalists to cover early childhood, grants to national child advocacy organizations, and spreading the UPK policy alternative through membership organizations of public officials.

Pew provided funding to two media organizations that served as important strategic partners for public exposure to UPK as a policy alternative. First, it funded the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Columbia University to educate journalists on early education. Funding Hechinger was crucial in getting the media to pay attention to the education of young children. With Pew funding, the Hechinger Institute hosted seminars for journalists on issues related to pre-k and early childhood education, thereby educating journalists on the importance of early childhood learning and the UPK policy alternative as the solution. Pew also provided a grant to the Education Writers Association to publish a series of reform briefs on early childhood education and to conduct a survey of reporters across the country to assess pre-k media coverage.

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[6] In some states, the courts were the most promising path for creating universal preschool. Pew provided a grant to the Education Law Center (ELC) in 2003 to assist legal teams in eight states to win early education litigation (Pew Charitable Trusts 2005b). With Pew funding, the ELC created 'Starting at 3' to promote and support legal advocacy to include pre-k in school finance litigation and state legislation.

In regard to national child advocacy organizations, a key example is Pew's funding of Voices for America's Children, a nonprofit membership organization with the broad mission to improve child well-being (Voices for Children 2007). Pew funds were used to disseminate information about UPK to state-level children's advocacy organizations to encourage them to make it a priority issue (Council of Chief State School Officers 2007a). Voices had state affiliates, many of whom received Pew funding to support state advocacy for UPK. Thus, Voices provided a mechanism for Pew to direct resources and information to state pre-k advocates that otherwise may not have been aware.

Finally, membership organizations of public officials were especially important partners for diffusing the UPK policy alternative. Pew created strategic partnerships with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), National League of Cities, and the National Conference of State Legislatures. Illustrative of this strategy was Pew's funding for CCSSO to 'educate and serve its membership to build support among the chiefs for expansion of quality, universal preschool opportunities for 3 and 4 year olds' (Council of Chief State School Officers 2007b). The strategy involved (1) creating a 'Cadre of Champions' consisting of school superintendents and commissioners who served as national, regional, and state spokespersons for pre-k investment, and (2) funding for regional meetings to develop state pre-k action plans, pre-k sessions at all CCSSO membership meetings, and a communication strategy (Council of Chief State School Officers 2007b). In all of the CCSSO meetings, the list of speakers drew from well-known pre-k advocates, many of whom received Pew funds. Similarly, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) received Pew funding to provide nonpartisan information on high-quality pre-k to all state policymakers. NCSL built a network of interested legislators, hosted annual policy institutes, developed written materials, and provided intensive support in 'selected states' to disseminate the UPK message (National Conference of State Legislatures Prekindergarten Leadership Institute 2007). Presenters at all of these strategic membership organizations included representatives from Pre-K Now and NIEER.

In summary, the web of Pew-funded organizations provided a complex network of mutually reinforcing messaging that UPK was an effective investment to improve educational outcomes and yield substantial future economic and social benefits. Pew-funded organizations' linked to each other's Web sites and posted to each other's research, publications, events, etc. The Web sites created a tight, interconnected network of mutual publicity as well as links to every imaginable source of information on the benefits of high-quality early childhood education in order to successfully advance the UPK policy alternative.

Overall, the UPK movement was successful in expanding the number of states that provide funding for pre-k: currently 43 states provide funding (Friedman-Krauss 2018). In states with low levels of advocacy capacity (e.g., Tennessee), Pew funding was decisive in the UPK legislative victory. In states with higher levels of advocacy capacity (e.g., Illinois), certainly the policy may have been enacted without Pew, but its funding of the coalition of interests helped 'move the needle' in important

ways.[7] Although Pew's giving program cannot be credited with every success, it can be credited with developing a comprehensive strategy for building momentum for policy change and diffusing UPK among states. Pew filled a capacity gap among advocates within states and helped bridge public officials' professional associations. Elevation and diffusion require funding and coordination, and Pew was a critical intermediary in those processes.

Case #2: foundations' role in extending foster care in California

In 2010, California passed a landmark law that allowed foster youth to stay in the foster care system until age 21 instead of emancipating at age 18. Officially titled the Fostering Connections Act, it was colloquially known as AB12—the bill number assigned to it by the California Assembly. This law was long called for by advocates, researchers, and others who noted research showing that youth who emancipate from the foster care system experience poor outcomes, with high rates of early pregnancy, homelessness, and involvement in the criminal justice system, and low rates of high school or college completion (Courtney et al. 2010). Staying in care until age 21 allows youth a variety of state protections—as well as modest monthly financial support—that had been shown in other states to improve outcomes for this vulnerable population (Courtney et al. 2010). Through this case, we show how a coalition of foundations were deeply involved in agenda setting prior to legislative passage but also had sustained involvement through the implementation period. This work was largely carried out by foundations playing intermediary roles and supporting close networks of interested actors, who saw reductions in state administrative capacity as an opening to wield their expertise for maximal influence in the policy process.

Promoting frames and alternatives through networks

The foundations working on support for extended foster care in California provide an excellent example of how foundations can work outside of the traditional grantor–grantee relationship to shape ideas, norms, and interests. In this case, foundations were highly networked with each other and with state and local government, all outside of their work with advocates, and had been for a long time. Throughout the early 2000s (and continuing to the present), formal networks, such as the national-level Youth Transition Funders Group, and state-level groups California Connected by Twenty-Five and California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, served as incubators for ideas and as spaces where foundation leaders, along with other private and public stakeholders, could engage in strategic planning, coordinated action, and the formation of a long-term vision. These networks are the sites at which the groundwork for building coalitions of interest is carried out. In this case, they helped sustain the involvement of foundations in securing agenda status,

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[7] Jerry Stermer, Voices for Illinois Children, personal communication, Chicago, IL, June 7, 2007.

successful legislative passage, and extensive involvement in implementing new programs for extended foster care in California.

These groups have an explicit focus on heightening influence, although they take different approaches in doing so. For example, the Youth Transition Funders Group reports that they 'provide a vibrant and active community for approximately 100 national, regional, and community funders to learn from each other and other experts in the field, stay abreast of new research and key policy developments, inform and influence policy and practice, and foster collaborative approaches to grantmaking.'[8] In California specifically, the California Connected by Twenty-Five group saw five major foundations coming together in the spring of 2004 to give funding to specific counties in California to develop and implement a more robust continuum of care for emancipating foster youth. These foundations, as well as others, were also involved in funding research that led to the evidence in support of AB12, and the funding and implementation of THP+, a youth transitional housing program in California that came to play an important role in AB12 as well. Foundations that were particularly active in California included (but were not limited to) the Water S. Johnson Foundation, the Stuart Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation.

The California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership is a particularly interesting group in that it is a partnership between major foundations (four as of this writing), the Judicial Council of California, the California Department of Social Services, and the County Welfare Directors Association of California. This composition reflects the importance of California's highly devolved political system, with each of the 58 counties having significant control over most social services. As a result, the County Welfare Directors Association is a powerful interest group in Sacramento. The deep, enduring, and voluntary cooperation between these groups is indicative of the durable ties and substantial influence that philanthropic foundations play in advocating, monitoring, and educating around specific policy alternatives. As one foundation executive put it, 'the idea is that in order to affect the outcomes we're looking for, we have to work across systems, policy, and practice… All the organizations and all the players are part of the California Co-Investment Partnership… As a collaboration, we were interested in seeing that AB12 was successful. Because we are in philanthropy, we can't really go out there and pound the pavement and promote policies, but we can promote ideas.'

This promoting of ideas was seen in several ways prior to the passage of AB12, particularly coordinated funding for high-quality academic research, connecting advocates with pre-identified researchers allowing for the dissemination of 'just-in-time' evidence during the legislative phase, coordinated support for capacity building at the county level, and targeted development of key interventions, like THP+. A key legislative staffer on the issue said, "So, the minute the federal bill[9] passed, I

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have the impression that philanthropy jumped in immediately to sort of figure out, 'How do we create a groundswell and how do we support this moving forward, and how can we be helpful?' Obviously, California is a big state and it's often a place where philanthropy chooses to be active, to help seed things. So we had some foundations who were already here trying to make change, and added this extending services for foster youth to their plank of priorities."

Several unique advantages of foundations can be seen in how they carried out this strategy of influence. First, they were highly trusted as experts because of their long history of involvement in this area and because of their investment in academic and evaluation research. Second, their substantial resources and ability to coordinate action allowed them to build a groundswell of support for a real innovation in policy, not just changes at the margins. This, in turn, led to considerable excitement that people—even government administrators—could be on the 'right side of history' and responsible for making the kind of policy change that doesn't come along very often. Thus, throughout all of their action, foundations leveraged their strengths— evidence based, resource rich, independent—to function as a key intermediary in bringing together government actors with child welfare advocates and practitioners. As one foundation executive noted, 'We are very much a mediator in the middle of it. We're not the attorneys; we're not the public system. We're not beholden to membership, so we can do whatever we want.' This meant a lot more than just providing funding—it also meant arranging calls, providing data, bringing in groups they felt did not have a strong enough voice at the table, and taking and distributing notes at meetings. In other words, finding ways to influence the influencers through infrastructure development.

Foundations' role as intermediaries in implementation

This strength as an intermediary can particularly be seen in foundations' actions at the implementation stage of the AB12 process, a part of the policy process that, to our knowledge, has not previously been considered in regard to foundations' role as interest groups. As the foundation executive above mentioned, foundations' long history of building support for extended foster care meant that they were unwilling to walk away after successful passage—they wanted to see the policy not just be enacted but also achieve its goal of appropriately supporting young adults. Thus, foundations saw it as part of their commitment to make sure that the implementation of AB12 was carried out in a way that was thoughtful, comprehensive, and responsive to stakeholders' concerns. As one foundation executive noted, 'This is groundbreaking legislation—you can't just count on someone doing it. How is it going to be done if you don't have the bandwidth, if you don't have the capacity or the people?'

This executive was alluding to a lack of administrative capacity in the implementing agency—the California Department of Children and Families (DCFS). That lack of capacity set the stage for foundations to have outsized influence in the implementation process and was recognized by all parties. One advocate put it bluntly: 'The

state needed more support is what it is. Making decisions, writing letters—that stuff has to be done by the state. They needed a full functioning team to work on this and they didn't have a full functioning team.' A key state administrator in the implementation process also acknowledged it: 'I can't fail to mention the fact that based on a fiscal crisis we have a hiring freeze. I have an over 30% vacancy rate in my shop that's doing a lot of the core policy work.'

As a result, another advocate noted that: 'CDSS, because of their capacity issues, has this crazy All County Letter process—their emergency regulations. They can't even get emergency regulations out on time, frankly. They're bright people. They're committed people. They wouldn't be doing this if they weren't. And yet it's this wacky—there's no public comment! It's very undemocratic. That's why we created this stakeholder process, because these are not formal regulations. Everything that was done, could and should have been done by the state if they had a proper regulatory making process that they went through.' These deviations from the 'proper regulatory making process' were largely due to capacity, however—DCFS simply didn't have the manpower to integrate a lengthy public comment period. These changes in the implementation process, largely due to lack of administrative capacity on the part of the state, can be directly linked to the expanded influence of the child welfare policy community. Emboldened by their own success, and funded by foundations, advocates became a coalition of interests who took up the charge to see the policy implemented in a way that was in line with their preferences and principles.

In other words, it was clear help would be needed, and foundations—and the long-standing policy communities they were at the center of—stepped in to do just that. When directly asked what foundations supported during the implementation phase, a foundation program officer replied, 'Development of regulations, the collaboration, supporting all aspects of it. Supporting the inclusive and open process, whether that was providing funding so that the state could have a consultant to help them, or providing funding to some of the partners (e.g., nonprofit child welfare advocates) who were working diligently on it but never really had a person at the table.'

What this translated to, then, was a remarkably collaborative process, where foundations paid for a consultant to organize state administrators and longtime advocates into a single team that worked together on all aspects of the implementation, funded legal advocates to help write the regulations, and funded a stakeholder inclusion process to make sure that all voices—including youth and families—were being heard. This process also included the infrastructure to support diffusion to other state agencies and departments with interest in the issue (the community college system, juvenile probation, etc.) as well as to each of the county-run child welfare departments.

In regard to the value to the state, but also speaking to the outsized level of influence, one legal advocate, whose role on the implementation team was funded through foundation support, said, 'I think that they've also seen real value in having us be part of the focus area teams because we've written huge chunks of the All County Letters for them and designed the forms. [Another lawyer] and I wrote the mutual agreement. [She] and I wrote the 6-month certification of participation form. We wrote the participation conditions, and rewrote them, and rewrote them,

and rewrote them again, based on stakeholder input. We've been workhorses in this process.' A state administrator with responsibility for the overall process noted the same thing: 'I would say that the bill sponsors, the advocates, have done a tremendous amount of work—a tremendous amount of work. Reviewing documents and short turnarounds, they get a lot of credit for rolling up their sleeves and putting forth a lot of effort. So it's not just getting opinions. It's writing documents, creating forms.'

Ultimately, this was seen to be of great value and probably leading to a better process than if the state did it alone. One participant noted that, in regard to the consultant, 'It wouldn't have necessarily been better to have a DSS person. It was beneficial to have someone who was independent; it allowed people to trust her.' A DCFS director reported that, 'What we typically would have done is had a smaller group that we kept checking with all that time, but we wouldn't have got the volume of information. And, because this spread across so many domains, the fact that [the advocates] could go engage higher education, when we really couldn't, because we were trying to do the nuts and bolts of the bill, implementation was greater. They could go and have forums with you-name-the-stakeholder-group and synthesize and bring that back up to us. It was very helpful… many of my staff feel like that's what we should have done all along. We should be doing that. But, we don't have the horsepower to do it… So, you know, there is this question of like who's really in charge of implementation? Historically, it's been the state agency. I think on this one we would say, you know, we still are kind of driving the bus, but we're not the only people who are deciding kind of how to get from here to there.'

Ultimately, without the sustained involvement of the policy community, the policy would have likely looked very different than it ultimately did—likely less generous, less flexible, and less adaptable to young adults in different life circumstances or in different regions. Foundations were key intermediaries within that policy community—they built the coalition of actors by incentivizing investment of others, bringing disparate actors together, and coordinating their action.

Discussion

In this paper, we presented two cases that highlight the unique strengths of foundations in multiple phases of the policy process. In particular, we show that because of foundations' unique resources and advantages, they are well-positioned to play the role of intermediary across the policy process, including agenda setting and policy change, policy diffusion, and implementation. Our research demonstrates that foundations are strategic policy actors with deep and sustained policy influence.

As depicted in Fig. 1, this research provides evidence that four key characteristics serve as important advantages when foundations attempt to play the role of intermediary in the policy process. First, unlike nonprofit organizations reliant on membership dues and/or grants, private foundations are financially independent. Their endowments provide them freedom and flexibility to choose where and how to allocate funding. For example, Pew decided to end its long-standing K-12 giving program and shift resources to UPK. This required board approval, but it did not require

raising additional funds for the program. Likewise, foundations in California could do things as diverse as pay for consultants to mediate groups, organize luncheons, and disseminate research.

Second, foundations fund respected academic research, not junk science, and that gives them credibility as trusted experts. Pew funded the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. In California, foundations funded research at Chapin Hall, an influential child welfare research center at the University of Chicago. Third, foundations fund innovation. They do this by funding nonprofits to advocate for new policy ideas and to test new programs, and then provide funding for evaluation to demonstrate that the innovations work. Pew funds, through NIEER, were used to evaluate the success of pre-k programs, which then built evidence that the investment does indeed pay off with improved educational outcomes. In California, the same thing was done in the California Connected by Twenty-Five Initiative, and with a well-timed cost–benefit analysis. Fourth, foundations are perceived to be primarily charitable. Because of their independent funding, foundations do not have a *material* interest in the policy outcomes. In both cases, this facilitated their ability to bring diverse groups to the table.

These key advantages allow foundations to play **intermediary roles** in the policy process. Our research indicates that they do this in four ways. First, foundations are able to fund networks of advocates to build support for a shared conception of a policy problem and frame. In the Pew case, they advanced the framing that state investment in UPK would yield improved educational outcomes. This was a strategic shift from the prior framing of childcare for ages 0–5, which was used to advocate for subsidies to enable maternal employment. In the California case, foundations helped to build momentum around the (once radical) notion that foster care support should not end when children turn 18, with the frame that the state should emulate the modern parenting practice of extended support. Second, foundations play intermediary roles by coordinating action to elevate policy frames. In both of these cases, foundations were the central hub of a network of actors, working to coordinate their activities behind the scenes to advocate for their preferred policy alternative. This includes promoting specific frames, as mentioned above, but also support for direct advocacy. Third, foundations can incentivize others to invest resources to advocate for its preferred policy. Pew incentivized participation by funding arrangements that built capacities of the advocates, paid for marketing plans, and educated journalists on the importance of early education. In California, foundations helped create a process that required buy-in from a multitude of agencies, but the process became so central to the policy that investment became almost mandatory for interested policy actors. And finally, foundations use their funding to link groups with different types of expertise and capacities to advance policy goals. In both cases, this meant creating a web of funded organizations that alternatively provided research, expanded advocacy capacity, broadened representation, and publicized through media. Taken as a whole, the strategic web of actors was comprehensive and effective at advancing both policy goals.

Thus, in both of these cases, foundations were key actors in attempting to elevate policy frames and advocacy for policy change. What is evident from the Pew case, however, is that **diffusion** occurred through a multipronged and comprehensive

strategy. This included dissemination of research by NIEER and advocacy strategies by Pre-K Now as well as funding of (1) presentations at professional membership organizations of school officials, legislators, and mayors, (2) peer learning among members, and (3) media coverage to educate the broader public about the importance of early education. For new frames to flourish, someone has to push them up to where they can be heard. Pew played this intermediary role by funding research and advocacy actors who could successfully spread the word.

What is evident from the California case is that foundations can play a much more active role in **implementation** than previously envisioned. By funding advocates to take a seat at the table, consultants to coordinate the process, and nonprofits to do public outreach, foundations were strategic in helping to produce an implementation process that was remarkable in its comprehensiveness as well as its focus on producing positive outcomes for youth. Although they were not involved themselves in the process, their vision was apparent in both the type of activities undertaken (e.g., stakeholder engagement) and stated goals for the program (measureable indicators for increased educational attainment and employment outcomes).

Conclusion

In this paper, we contribute to the emerging literature on foundations as political actors by following the actions of foundations in the policy process, showing how foundations strategically frame policy ideas, build interest group coalitions to elevate their preferred policy alternative onto the governmental agenda, promote the alternative across and within different state policy contexts, and facilitate an implementation outcome that is aligned with their preferences. In doing so, we argue that foundations wield significant political power through their intermediary role within policy communities.

While we do not have evidence that it was *only* foundation interventions, and not other factors, that were responsible for the changes in policy processes and outcomes detailed in our case studies, we do provide strong evidence that foundations played a central coordinating role in those policy change efforts and that those efforts were ultimately successful. It may be that these two policy issues had sufficient momentum to be successful without foundation intervention, that other interest groups would have stepped in, or that the coalitions would have formed independent of an intermediary. Future research should seek out examples of policy change where foundations have and have not been involved to see how they develop more or less differently. More work also needs to be done on the degree to which influence is multi-directional—e.g., how much do funded actors influence the actions and beliefs of foundations and each other? Finally, it should also be noted that both of our cases are concerned with the well-being of children—sympathetic and dependent populations with little political power (Schneider and Ingram 1997). Future research should be done to assess how foundations may behave differently or play different roles when advocating for policies that primarily benefit advantaged populations, those with political power, or policies that are aimed at populations seen as less deserving.

In conclusion, we raise the issue of the transparency and accountability of foundations in the policy process. As self-funded elite actors, the actions of foundations are often veiled and they are largely unaccountable for their actions beyond adherence to IRS regulations. In the Pew case, we see actions intentionally hidden—Pew shifted from funding TEE to Pre-K Now to distance itself from advocacy activities—even though 90% of the Pre-K Now budget came from Pew. Documenting Pew's giving strategy required backward mapping to trace the flow of funds, which is an indication that IRS 990 forms are insufficient to achieve visibility. In the California case, the actions of the foundations were not explicitly hidden, but the extent of advocate involvement in implementation likely would come as a surprise to California taxpayers.

Although many residents have limited trust in government administrators, there is a level of accountability that disappears when privately funded actors—with limited transparency—begin doing the work of public agencies. Although in these cases it led to generous policies that benefited vulnerable youth in ways most people would see as contributing to the public good, a similar process could be carried out to achieve policy goals that are clearly not in the public good (e.g., damaging the environment, exacerbating inequality, reduced access to needed services). Future research should focus on making the invisible visible across the policy process so that hidden interest groups, like foundations, are better incorporated into policy process theories and frameworks. This is particularly important in the hollow state era where reduced state administrative infrastructure creates openings for the policy process to be influenced by interest groups—like foundations—with varying levels of commitment to the public good.

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