

Conversations with Gara LaMarche on May 22, May 31, and June 14, 2013

Participants

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Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Gara LaMarche.

Summary

Gara LaMarche is a Senior Fellow at NYU, was formerly the President and CEO of The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Vice-President for The Open Society Institute. GiveWell and Good Ventures spoke with him as part of our investigation of opportunities for philanthropy to have an impact through political advocacy. The main subjects of discussion were philanthropic strategies for advocacy, criteria for choosing an issue area, and details of specific issue areas.

Philanthropic strategies for advocacy

Coalition approach

Building a coalition of groups working at all different levels is an old idea, but it works. It can be done in several different ways, such as by making a large grant to one group that then allocates the money to other groups. The important thing is to have a lot of people at the table so you have players in a lot of different issue areas.

A good example is funding the Health Care for America Now coalition, which brought together health and civil rights organizations and played a role in the development and passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Bottom-up change

A powerful tool for an advocacy coalition is bottom-up change like grass-roots and social change work. By funding member-based organizations (such as Sierra Club or Amnesty International) you can help build public pressure. Many funders aren't comfortable funding grassroots activity, so I have seen plenty of room for funding in immigration work and other areas, and for linking up grassroots organizations around the country, which can be important.

Creating new coalitions

It's best if a coalition exists organically and you come in to put wind in its sails, such as with immigration. Creating it is harder and you have to be careful, but sometimes it is necessary. Sometimes, as with The Atlantic Philanthropies, the reality is somewhere in between; some organizations had the idea themselves, but they wanted backing to take it further, so The Atlantic Philanthropies came in and supported it.

Creating new organizations

Creating a ground-level organization from scratch risks tangling with vanity issues, but is sometimes appropriate. For example, in 1996 George Soros was looking at finance reform and money in politics. There were existing players, but others were saying they wanted something new, so with Bill Moyers and Schumann foundation, Public Campaign was created.

Choosing an issue area

The choice of causes will determine which type of resources are needed to get involved in the field. In areas like marriage equality and criminal justice where there are established organizations, it may be sufficient to make grants. In newer fields, more human resources are needed to convene the right people, start organizations, and determine areas of focus.

It is possible for relatively small amounts of money to make a difference in an area by coming in at the right moment and tipping the scales, by organizing other players in the field, by investing in young leadership development, or by catalyzing other funding on an area.

Issue Crowding

One thing that should affect which issue you choose to work on is how many groups are already working on the same issue. If there are few groups working on the issue, there's less clutter and it's easier to break new ground, for example when George Soros did drug policy reform and other issues. He wasn't afraid to be the dominant funder and to get the ball rolling, and years later that seems important because we might never have made progress on those issues otherwise. Chuck Feeney also used this strategy. They have professional staff they respect, boards of directors who were substantial people, and they were not a one-man operation.

Having allies is crucial in the long term, and can be very helpful in the short term as well. So in some cases a philanthropist might prefer a "crowded" field where they will have more partners from the beginning. The choice might depend on the scale of the philanthropic effort.

Getting started in a new issue area

When looking at new areas and thinking about getting involved, talk to generalists who know something about the issue area. They might be able to specify foundations and key organizations you should talk with, and some starting information.

Then, once you have a problem and want to solve it, you can talk to the experts (funders, journalists, academics, policy people) serially or collectively, and then distill that into a funding strategy.

Serial conversation approach

You can hire someone to have conversations and scope out the field. This could be a consulting group like McKinsey or Bridgespan, or a smart person or generalist that can talk to 30-40 people and distill their results.

Convening power

As was done with campaign finance reform, school reform, and immigration reform, you can identify experts, bring them together for a day or weekend, and facilitate a conversation to help determine where key intervention points are. The day-to-day work of such an event can be carried out by a program officer or director. You can learn a lot from having everyone together for a day or two. You can ask questions like.

- What are the key issues?
- What are the logjams to progress?
- Who's doing good work?
- What strategies are worth pursuing?

The answers will help generate a sense of the best opportunities to consider funding; opportunities that have the right people doing the right work.

Talking directly to an organization

Groups are sometimes not used to talking directly to funders who want to know what they would do with unrestricted funds; they may be more used to chasing funding rather than being creative about what they would do with unrestricted money. The ones with their own vision, however, are the best ones to fund.

Sometimes having a trusted partner of the funder be the one conducting the conversation may lead to more candid answers because it steers the organization away from being careful about what they want a funder to hear or worrying about criticizing other players.

Synergy among issue areas

It may be important to look for and exploit connections among the issues you choose. In the progressive social justice world groups are collaborating more across issue silos, such as LGBT groups working on immigrants rights or criminal justice, which can open up opportunities for even greater impact.

Potential issue areas

Immigration reform

Immigration reform advocacy is being lead by the Alliance for Citizenship. There is a relatively small central staff in DC that organizes the campaign; most of the funding is used to make grants to local organizations in about 30 states.¹

¹ On July 1, Gara LaMarche sent a follow-up email with a quote from Alliance for Citizenship regarding its funding situation as of that date: "A4C's 9-month campaign budget is \$27.8 million, representing the level of investment necessary if we are going to counter our opponents' efforts to derail reform. We have already raised approximately \$19.5 million, leaving \$8.4 million to be raised. The most pressing needs include \$4 million to support work being done by groups in the field, \$1.9 million needed for constituency education and engagement, \$1 million for communications, and \$300,000 for policy and research."

The campaign feels that it needs additional funds to support its efforts this year. It is generally harder to raise money for 501(c)4 activities than 501(c)3 activities. The funding for 501(c)4 activities has primarily come from the Open Society Advocacy Center, Atlantic Philanthropies, and labor unions. Other funding has come from the Open Society Foundations, Ford Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation, and Unbound Philanthropies.

Additional funding for the Alliance for Citizenship would enable the campaign to continue past September, if it takes that long for legislation to pass, and perhaps to hire more state-level staff to rally constituents and pressure individual legislators to support the bill.

Advocates are optimistic that immigration reform will be passed by the end of the year. The Latino support for the Democrats in the 2012 election was driven in part by engagement efforts such as voter registration and get out the vote efforts. This has set up the chance for immigration reform. In addition, the coalition for immigration reform has broadened. For example, environmental, LGBT groups, and evangelical Christians have signed on.

Funders, and especially the Ford Foundation have, for many years, been laying the groundwork and building the capacity of these organizations in preparation for this moment. This community is what differentiates the immigrants' rights campaign from financial reform.

After an immigration reform bill is passed there will need to be advocacy and funding for implementation to ensure that social service organizations are equipped to handle the new processes.

The humanitarian goal of opening the borders is not a part of the current debate. The immigration bill debate is framed around securing the borders with a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants currently in the US. The only discussion around the relaxing of entry requirements is around labor market needs in agriculture and tech. It is unlikely that open border advocates could, at this point, have much effect on the bill, though they may be able to counteract some of the pull toward more resources for securing the borders. On a wider scale, the Ford Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Open Society Foundations are interested in global immigration issues.

Climate change

There is a big drive in the climate change movement to deal with the issue congressionally in the next few years. It is a relatively well-funded set of groups, but advocates have had difficulty getting traction because the political dynamics are quite different from other progressive issues. Theda Skocpol wrote a paper about what went wrong during the 2009 – 2010 effort to pass climate change legislation, “Naming The Problem: What It Will Take To Counter Extremism And Engage Americans In The Fight Against Global Warming.” One difficulty with climate legislation compared with health care is that there are many region-specific issues such as dealing with Democrats from coal states.

The public debate on climate change seems to have gone in the wrong direction in recent years. Many moderate Republicans who used to favor policies to limit carbon emissions have moved toward climate change denialism because of the dynamics in the Republican party.

It tends to be an area that's top-heavy, with too little grassroots presence. Some big California funders are not interested in the bottom-up social change strategies, and instead opt for inside-the-beltway strategies, such as the ones used by the National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF).

Some foundations such as the Ford Foundation, OSI, and Atlantic use bottom-up strategies more frequently, but are not as involved in the environmental space. Thus there might be room for a funder to encourage more bottom-up approaches and get more local environmental groups and environmental justice groups involved in the game.

350.org is one organization taking a bottom-up approach, and there are a couple national groups with a strong base of ground support such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club.

It's an interesting issue because people can both advocate for policy change and take personal actions that contribute to positive change, i.e. by reducing personal carbon emissions.

Marriage equality

There has been so much success in the cause of marriage equality that the danger is that there could be complacency and reduction in funding before the fight is fully won.

The ACLU has local reach that no other organization can match. It has strong local capacity in every state of the country, combined with strong central leadership. It is often the most respected and knowledgeable lobbyist in an area. Money spent on the ACLU's local marriage equality efforts would likely be well spent.

Drug policy

Drug policy has become more of a mainstream issue in recent years. When George Soros started the Drug Policy Institute as a think tank in the 1990s, it was the only significant organization working on this issue. It was a controversial area to work on and policy change seemed far off.

Medical marijuana has changed the face of the issue somewhat. The feeling toward drug policy among communities of color has changed because of the war on drugs and the resulting high number of black men going to prison for marijuana offenses.

Criminal justice reform

The Open Society Foundations and Atlantic Philanthropies have funded the movement to abolish the death penalty. Enormous progress had been made on this. Five or six states have declared moratoriums on the death penalty and executions are down almost everywhere. The reframing of the argument in terms of innocence and fairness has been very effective. There's a long way to go but there are reasons for optimism.

Other potentially promising issues within criminal justice reform include:

- Quality of lawyering for disadvantaged people.
- Prison conditions.
- Over-incarceration and harsh sentencing, especially for drug crimes.
- Reentry of prisoners into society. This area includes prison education.

Structural political reform

There's been little progress on campaign finance reform in the last ~15 years, with the exception of public financing schemes adopted in the 1990s by Maine and Arizona.

There's a promising effort underway in New York around public financing of elections.

Potential aspects of political reform:

- Legislative reform, including reform of the filibuster.
- Redistricting.
- Protection against voter limitation, such as voter ID laws.
- Making voting easier.

Groups that are working on this include:

- Brennan Center for Justice (NY)
- Demos (NY)
- Common Cause
- Various civil rights organizations

Education reform

The current wave is being funded by many foundations; it's doing some good things but is largely focusing on high stakes testing and closing schools. There is not a lot of work to include the voice of students and parents or having communities fund their own schools; there seems to be a need for more resources in using this approach.

Social justice media

Documentary film, photography, and other social justice oriented media may be an area to consider.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>