

A conversation with Matt Stoller on August 27, 2013

Participants

- Matt Stoller — former fellow at the Roosevelt Institute
- Holden Karnofsky — Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Matt Stoller.

Summary

GiveWell spoke to Matt Stoller to learn more about policy-oriented philanthropy. Conversation topics included “downhill” policy areas, Dr. Steve Teles, and whether it is worthwhile for philanthropists to seek advice from Congressional staff.

Downhill policy areas

“Downhill” policy areas are areas where some progress is already being made or seems likely to come soon. Examples include criminal justice reform, drug policy reform, gay rights, and surveillance. It is highly likely that there will be reform in the area of surveillance, where the legitimacy of Cold War-era institutions such as the CIA and FBI are being challenged and where technological changes are redefining privacy. Philanthropists can have a large influence on the nature of progress in downhill policy areas (e.g., the specifics of which bills gets passed). “Uphill” policy areas are those areas where it is difficult to make progress, such as campaign finance reform.

It is easier for philanthropists to shape emerging fields, such as with financial reform and the ethics of nanotechnology, as opposed to established fields, such as with health care reform.

Views on Dr. Steven Teles and others in his network

GiveWell asked for Mr. Stoller's opinion on Dr. Teles and his network because GiveWell is working with Dr. Teles as part of its work on philanthropy in politics.

Dr. Steven Teles has thought deeply about philanthropic involvement in right-wing politics. His worldview, and that of other centrist Democrats in his network, are significantly shaped by events such as the impeachment of President Clinton and the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, which disrupted the Democratic political establishment that had been working well for Democrats for fifty years. In the 2000s, Dr. Teles and others studied the Right Wing’s infrastructure of think tanks, issue groups, and grassroots organizations, with the goal of replicating the effective parts of that model. Many dominant left-wing groups, such as Media Matters for America and Center for American Progress, were originally funded to mirror existing right-wing groups.

Mr. Stoller believes that the Democratic Party has effectively replicated much of the

infrastructure of the Right, and has built a top-down model of advocacy and research funded by entrenched interests. However, this infrastructure has perversely not led to creative progressive intellectual solutions to pressing problems; it has mostly led to increased ability for Democrats to engage in aggressive partisan combat, while building in top-down mechanisms for messaging and policy control. In that sense, it mirrors the right-wing infrastructure. With high levels of funding, this infrastructure has placed in power a political leadership that has not presented solutions to excessive carbon emissions, that engages in policy-making favoring the wealthy, and that continues a legacy of military adventurism abroad. What has changed is that the political leaders doing this are Democrats rather than Republicans. A political infrastructure funded to empower entrenched interests will do so, and can use either political party as a vessel.

Mr. Stoller also disapproves of the way arguments about long-term accomplishment are used to mask short-term betrayal and failure. Any competent ideological infrastructure should have immediate ideological impact, as well as long-term impact. Dr. Teles and others switch back and forth between supporting the Democratic party, with the short-term goal of electing Democrats, and funding ideological groups on long-term time horizons. This allows operatives within this infrastructure to evade accountability for dramatic policy-failures, with the argument that losing policy fights is necessary for electoral victories.

Seeking advice from Congressional legislative directors

Some Congressional staff (e.g., legislative directors) will be able to provide good advice to philanthropists. However, the majority of legislative directors are likely to have limited understanding of philanthropic organizations and how to effectively deploy capital to advocacy groups. They will be familiar with trade associations and issue groups in their area of expertise.

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