

A conversation with Larry Kramer and Daniel Stid on December 6, 2013

Participants

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- Daniel Stid — Senior Fellow, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Larry Kramer and Daniel Stid.

Summary

GiveWell spoke to Larry Kramer and Daniel Stid to learn more about philanthropic opportunities to improve American democracy, particularly by reducing polarization and gridlock. Conversation topics included the Hewlett Foundation's focus on structural interventions in areas such as Congressional rules and primary elections, as well as recommended readings.

Interventions to reduce polarization and gridlock

The Hewlett Foundation plans to prioritize the following interventions:

- **Changing Congressional rules**, particularly those that concentrate too much power in the hands of a minority within a party or, alternatively (and paradoxically), in the hands of party leaders.
- **Reforming the primary system**, particularly with regard to candidate selection. The current system often leads to the selection of polarized candidates, even in moderate and competitive districts. Evidence suggests that most approaches related to primary reform, such as the "top two" primary system (in which all candidates run in the same primary), have not led to much progress. The essential problem is that primary voter turnout tends to be small and polarized. Little work has been done to increase primary turnout, and most efforts to do so (in general elections) focus on rallying voters' emotions, which leads to further polarization. A better way to increase turnout is to make voting more convenient. Efforts to increase primary turnout would face less opposition from Republicans than similar efforts in general elections.
- **Changing the leadership dynamic**. As the Democratic and Republican parties have become more unified, party leadership has become increasingly concentrated. Leadership structures that are more dispersed might be better for democracy.

Other promising interventions include:

- Campaign finance reform at the primary level, where interests at the ideological

end points contribute a disproportionately large amount of money. (Campaign finance contributes less to polarization at the general election level.) Democracy would also benefit from a campaign finance system that is less candidate centered and more party centered.

- Encouraging members of Congress to build relationships across party lines. Personal relationships among policymakers have the potential to reduce gridlock over time when combined with other interventions.
- Changing media coverage of politics to better inform the public about issues and solutions and exerting pressure on media outlets that encourage polarization.

Current investments by the Hewlett Foundation

The Hewlett Foundation contributes funding to some groups that work to improve the capacity for Congress to govern. These groups include the Bipartisan Policy Center, the Congressional Research Service, and No Labels, an advocacy group that supports a bipartisan coalition of policymakers. Grants made to these organizations are one-time investments rather than ongoing ones, though that could change once the initiative is approved and begins to roll out.

The Hewlett Foundation is also funding research on political negotiation, particularly regarding how the dynamics of political negotiation may be changed to improve governance. (The Hewlett Foundation is largely responsible for creating the academic field around conflict resolution in politics.)

Funding and partnerships

The Hewlett Foundation's tentative three-year budget to do work in this area is \$15 million for each of the first three years, after which, if the program seems promising, the annual budget could be increased—perhaps to as much as \$30 million per year (roughly the size of the foundation's other national programs). This budget was estimated via comparison to the budgets of other Hewlett Foundation programs, particularly its Education and Land Conservation programs. The program could eventually absorb as much funding as possible to do work in this field; its strategy could be adapted according to the level of available funding.

For progress to be made, the field needs at least \$200-300 million per year of well-coordinated spending. It will be difficult to get funders in this field to coordinate their work, because existing funders are unlikely to change their programs, but there is an opportunity for new funders to strategically align their work. The Hewlett Foundation and several partners are creating a map of the existing funding in this area to identify opportunities and to help coordinate different organizations' spending, and the Foundation is also doing a survey of all 50 states to identify those that have the highest potential for impact. The Hewlett Foundation could model its approach with respect to collaborating with other funders to improve democracy after its work structuring collaboration in climate. Both fields require similar kinds of state-level work and coordination among

funders.

There are two types of existing funders in relevant areas. Some funders operate programs explicitly designed to improve American democracy. Funders of this type include the Open Society Foundations (OSF), the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation. Collectively, these funders spend in the tens of millions of dollars per year. Other funders are involved in work that is not explicitly about improving democracy but is aligned with such efforts. These funders tend to work in areas such as media (mostly) and “get out the vote” campaigns. Between both types of funders, the field spends in the hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

Recommended reading

It would be instructive to read about structural developments that have contributed to polarization in the last few decades, in order to gain a sense for how future developments might ameliorate polarization.

Surveys suggest that the underlying cultural dynamic of the American public has not changed significantly since the 1950’s and that changes in political dynamics have largely been the result of structural developments.

Relevant past developments include:

- The Voting Rights Act, which strengthened the association of liberals with the Democratic Party and conservatives with the Republican Party in the ‘60s and ‘70s. This outcome suggests that the increasing trend of polarization is reflective of the public’s underlying views.
- The increase in government activity, e.g. the rise in social and environmental regulation in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, which led to an activist state and, later, to a conservative backlash. These events deepened political divides and strengthened the alignment of interests with particular parties.
- The “Gingrich Revolution,” or the Republican Party’s success in the 1994 midterm elections. Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein point to this event as a major contributor to polarization. Dr. Kramer considers it to be more an effect than a cause of polarization.

Good readings on these topics include:

- “The Transformation of American Politics: Activist Government and the Rise of Conservatism,” edited by Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol.
- “Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class,” by Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson.
- “Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate,” by Frances Lee. This text argues that disagreement between the Democratic and Republican parties is more often a contest for control than a reflection of

ideological difference.

- “Political Parties in the American Mold,” by Leon Epstein. This text was written about and during the period when party dynamics were most functional (1930’s to 1970’s).
- Works by David Karol and his colleagues discussing the rising influence of “policy demanders,” or interest groups that are closely aligned with parties, such as the National Rifle Association and public sector unions.

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