

A conversation with Dylan Matthews on 04/10/13

Participants

- Dylan Matthews - staff reporter, Wonkblog at the Washington Post
- Holden Karnofsky — GiveWell, Co-Executive Director

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Dylan Matthews. Dylan Matthews was representing himself, and his statements are not meant to represent his employer.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Dylan Matthews as part of its initial exploration of policy advocacy. They discussed GiveWell's basic understanding of what sorts of activities a funder can support and when/why they might be expected to work, and then discussed which political issues are important from a humanitarian perspective and which are "tractable" in the sense that more philanthropic funding may have substantial impact.

Non-bold type below indicates GiveWell's summary of Mr. Matthews's comments.

On the activities that funders can support to work toward policy change

I do think your existing picture has the lay of the land pretty well. Another advantage of think tank work, in addition to potentially influencing policy, is that it can inform your own views on the issues.

Lawsuits can be a major part of an effective strategy. In the area of gay rights, the organizations that have focused on legal battles seem to have been more impactful than larger organizations that haven't. Two particularly effective ones: Lambda Legal (national) and Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD, focused on Massachusetts).

Being good at winning over and forming alliances with existing interest groups is also very important. A big reason that health care reform went through was convincing pharma and insurance companies that this was good for them too.

Another strategy is organizing elites in specific issue areas. Celebrity awareness building is potentially impactful; Live Aid may have been impactful.

There's a really good book by Frank Baumgartner at UNC-Chapel Hill. It's a study of lobbying in DC. Things are often in equilibrium. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Not losing is a win. There's a process for blocking change; creating change is broadly more difficult.

On campaign-focused funding (working on a particular issue at an opportune time) vs. capacity building (supporting relevant organizations so that they're better prepared when an opportune time arises)

For some issues - for example, health care, climate change, and immigration - you need one big bill. In those cases capacity building makes a lot of sense.

Teles and Schmitt have a good paper contrasting financial reform with health care, in terms of how strong existing groups' capacity was when an opportune political moment arose.

For something like foreign aid, it might be more important to build relationships with Congress and the administration so you can get incremental things passed.

On particularly effective organizations and funders

Civil society is definitely important. Democracy Alliance has had a real impact. There's a very good argument that the Ford Foundation's investment in law school clinics in 60s and 70s had a hard to quantify but real impact on the makeup of legal profession and the strategies of the organized left.

I think Atlantic Philanthropies, which spent tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars on health care reform backing Health Care for America Now, made a big difference.

I think a lot of philanthropic effort around raising awareness of climate change has been impactful. There's a guy in California, Stier [sp?], who funds a lot of advocacy in that regard, but I couldn't tell you what the big foundations are. Look into who's funding 350.org or Sierra Club. The National Wildlife Federation is very effective (note that my girlfriend works there). The League of Conservation Voters runs a pretty lean shop; NRDC plays an effective think tank type role in this area.

A lot of the best organizations aren't necessarily doing everything at once; something like Ducks Unlimited can be effective focusing on one issue.

I'd look a lot at what ALEC has done. That's a group for conservative state legislators to share model legislation. They've written a lot of laws at the state level where people don't have the capacity to research legislation on their own. Public Policy Network is another effective conservative group. On a national scale, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities is the single most influential liberal think tank in terms of access to the White House. Center for Global Development plays a similar role for aid.

Democrats for Education Reform seems fairly effective.

It's hard to beat the banks in terms of ruthlessly efficient lobbying. You should read the Washington Monthly story on financial reform.

On how to determine which issues are "crowded" with money vs. which issues have relatively little money on a particular side

Your best bet for hard data will be Sunlight Foundation partners, particularly opensecrets.org.

On immigration and education the two sides seem roughly evenly matched. On energy there's a big imbalance: environmental/clean energy groups have a lot less lobbying money. On foreign aid I don't think there's much money; the lobby for less defense spending is basically nonexistent.

In our shoes, which issues would you invest philanthropic support in?

Unless I had a ton of money I wouldn't give to environmental groups because they have an existing apparatus. I wouldn't get too involved in the immigration debate because businesses are interested in expanding immigration levels. In both of these cases, there may be diminishing returns to more capacity building.

I might get involved in agricultural subsidies. There are a lot of people in DC who know that we should be restructuring subsidies.

Criminal justice reform is another potentially promising issue. Things like reforming probation and parole so people are less likely to reoffend.

Foreign aid is a potentially promising issue.

On drug policy: the most likely reforms there are sentencing reforms, and reforms to marijuana statutes. The latter is really important to some people, but it just is not a sizable share of the prison problem and would not make a sizable dent in the negative externalities from drug prohibition. To do the latter, you'd have to address the way we deal with coke and meth and heroin.

On areas that aren't typically seen as "humanitarian" but could be relevant to overall growth, innovation and development

Drug IP law is an important area, though I don't know whether there's going to be much movement there. I might try to reform software patents and that's an area that might be tractable, more so than tax reform or something like that.

Immigration reform (expanding the population) and increasing funding for basic research are important issues from this perspective.

On the organizations involved in basic research funding

Scientists and universities are influential. Organizations like Susan G. Komen for the Cure do lobby for more basic research in their issue areas, but they may not be as good as

they could be at coordinating with each other to advocate for more basic research in general.

You might want to read *Reputation and Power* (a history of the FDA).

FDA reform could be a tough issue to get involved in. If things flared up, drug companies would spend a lot of money on it.

On organ sales: my gut feeling is that you'll never get organ sales legalized. You might get something like compensating live donors, or something where the government buys organs. There isn't really lobbying on this front.

I wonder whether there's room for a think tank devoted to issues that liberals and conservatives agree, such as occupational licensing (though occupational licensing is more of a local/state issue).

One out-there idea is to build capacity for lobbying against restrictions on medical science, such as genetic engineering of fetuses.