

A Conversation with Aaron Goldzimer on October 19, 2013

Participants:

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Summary

GiveWell spoke to Aaron Goldzimer as part of an investigation into efforts to improve American democracy. The conversation focused on polarization and gridlock in U.S. politics. Money in politics, government transparency and accountability, and the Hewlett Foundation's proposed Democratic Process Initiative were also discussed.

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

The field of reforming American democracy

Efforts to reform American democracy might be broken down into several (often overlapping) categories. Some of the more prominent are:

1. Making government more effective and accountable. This category includes increasing the transparency and accountability of government. It also includes other efforts to improve public administration and the performance of agencies.
2. Reducing the role of money in politics.
3. Reducing polarization and gridlock.
4. Others....

Recently, polarization and gridlock have not only led the United States government to struggle to make policy, but also to the sequester, to the shutdown, to playing chicken with U.S. debt default, etc., etc. Mr. Goldzimer believes it to be the most important of the above categories at the moment.

Increased polarization and gridlock

There are at least four factors that contribute to increased polarization and gridlock in U.S. politics:

1. **The population has become more sorted and/or polarized.** Changes in the media, geographic sorting (whereby people with similar political views have become more likely to be located geographically near each other), demographics, and culture all contribute to this type of polarization.
2. **Congressional representatives are more polarized than the population.** The perverse effects of our electoral systems contribute to this piece of

- polarization – and include gerrymandering, the primary system, voter turnout patterns, the voting system, etc.
3. **Certain institutional and political dynamics act to polarize Congress still further after officials are elected.** Congressional rules, think tanks, and interest groups can impede policymaking even where there is no disagreement about the optimal policy
 4. **The polarization produced by these factors then interacts with the United States' unique system of multiple veto-points to produce gridlock and ungovernability:** In the United States' presidential system there are many veto points at which political players can prevent policy change. This means that polarization in the United States causes gridlock, unlike in countries with parliamentary systems.

While both sides have moved toward the extremes, polarization is asymmetric and the Republican Party has contributed more than the Democratic Party.

Interventions to reduce polarization and gridlock

Some interventions that might reduce polarization or gridlock are:

- **Changing Congressional rules and norms.** The filibuster and the "Hastert Rule," a norm (not really a rule) that prevents legislation from being voted on unless supported by most members of the majority party in the House, help create gridlock. The Congressional ban on earmarks and an excess of transparency in Congress also may have increased gridlock by impeding Congressional dealmaking.
- **Reform of the primary system.** The primary system may select Congressional candidates with extreme views by putting the selection of candidates in the hands of the most active party members, who dominate primaries. Political extremists also sometimes use primaries to defeat candidates they see as too moderate. Possible reforms to the primary system include open primaries (where voting in primaries is not restricted to party members) or California's new nonpartisan primary system.
- **Instant runoff voting.** Implementing instant runoff voting could lead to the election of more moderate candidates by benefitting candidates who can appeal to voters for whom they are not a first choice.
- **Media activism.** Media activism could be used to exert pressure on media outlets that encourage polarization.
- **Increasing voter turnout.** Voter turnout in the United States is low and partisans are more likely to vote. Increasing voter turnout could therefore increase the proportion of voters that are moderate. This could be done through voter registration drives or get out the vote campaigns, through policy changes that make voting easier such as early voting, same day

registration, internet voting or mail-in voting, or through implementing compulsory or incentivized voting.

- **Reforming the Constitution.** The American presidential system is particularly vulnerable to gridlock because of its many veto points. While extremely politically difficult, fundamental Constitutional reform might reduce gridlock. A specific intervention in this domain would be to fund thinking and discussion about the Constitution so that proposals and frameworks are prepared if a window of opportunity for fundamental reform arises.
- **Reversing McCain-Feingold.** The McCain-Feingold Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act's limits on donations to parties created an incentive to instead donate to less accountable outside groups.

Foundations and organizations working on American democracy

Some organizations working on various aspects of this cause include:

- The Sunlight Foundation
- The Center for Responsive Politics
- The Center for Effective Government
- Common Cause
- The Campaign Legal Center
- Public Campaign
- Fund for the Republic
- FairVote
- Media Matters for America
- ProPublica

Some individuals working on various aspects of the cause include:

- Jonathan Soros
- Marc Caplan
- Lawrence Lessig

Some foundations that make grants in this area include:

- The Rockefeller Brothers Fund currently makes about \$3 million per year in grants related to democracy.
- The Omidyar Network.
- The Open Society Foundations.
- The MacArthur Foundation.

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