

## Gara LaMarche on Wealthy Donors, Philanthropy and Progressive Politics

David Callahan

March 08, 2021

Over the past quarter-century, Gara LaMarche has had a super-interesting career in philanthropy and progressive politics. For nearly a decade, starting in the mid-1990s, he worked for George Soros, helping Soros figure out how to give away hundreds of millions of dollars in the United States. During that time, the Open Society Foundations would emerge as a key early funder of causes like criminal justice reform and marriage equality.

LaMarche then went to work for another top mega-donor, Chuck Feeney, and led Atlantic Philanthropies, where he was once again in charge of giving away huge piles of money. After that, he became head of the Democracy Alliance, a network of wealthy donors that collectively moves tens of millions of dollars a year to progressive causes. Along the way, LaMarche has worked with just about every important organization and leader on the left. Nobody better knows the strengths and weaknesses of today's progressive infrastructure than he does. He has also spent quite a bit of time thinking about the problematic nature of philanthropy, especially when it's billionaires like Soros and Feeney giving away the money.

LaMarche has been a practitioner of big philanthropy, but also a thoughtful critic. I always learn something from listening to him, and it was great to have a chance to talk to him recently, not long after he announced that he would be stepping down as president of the Democracy Alliance. You can listen to the podcast, as well as other episodes of my show, [Inside Change](#), or read a condensed transcript of our conversation below.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**David:** Hi Gara, thanks for coming on the show.

**Gara:** It's great to be here.

**David:** It's a little hard to know where to begin this conversation, given your very long history in progressive politics and philanthropy. You spent a decade at the ACLU in the 1980s. You were at the Pan American Center. I guess the point where I'd like to pick up the story is when you go work for George Soros at the Open Society Institute. That was in the 1990s. You were getting in on the ground floor of what became one of the great philanthropic enterprises in history. Tell me about that.

**Gara:** Well, it was 1996. Soros had been principally active philanthropically in other parts of the world, famously in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, a bit in Africa, a bit in Latin America. His global foundation network, in the five or so years before 1996, had become already quite large and had an enormous impact.

He never originally wanted to work in the United States. He began to make some forays in the mid-'90s, before I got there, into drug policy. He thought that the debate over drugs in the United States was one-sided and there needed to be a more open discussion about drug policy. He formed something called the Lindesmith Center, which was a think tank on drug policy. He also started the project on death in America—which was about the way people die and care at the end of life. Those were two things that primarily focused on the United States, but he hadn't thought of establishing a bigger U.S. program.

George thought of the United States as essentially an open society in the way that it had civil rights and liberties and free press and free education, and all the kinds of things that he was trying to establish in the former Soviet sphere.

Around 1994 and 1995, seeing what he thought was a growing tendency toward what he would call market fundamentalism, George began to think that the United States needed more of his philanthropic attention. He gathered some people together to advise him. He decided that the principal problem in the United States was inequality, distortions of power, and insufficient access to public goods and services.

I never really aspired to be in philanthropy, but when the opportunity came to create a bigger program [for Soros] around a set of U.S. issues—criminal justice, education, reproductive rights, immigration reform, and so on, I thought it was a great opportunity.

When I started, there were just a handful of employees with a very small budget of a couple of million dollars. It was probably the greatest experience of my professional life because I got to create something in a great institution from almost nothing. Between May of 1996, when I came on, and about a year later, we went from about \$5 million to \$100 million dollars in spending, and about a couple of staff to about a hundred staff. It was a very, very rapid-growth operation.

**David:** It's interesting to look back to that moment in the mid-1990s because it was after the Gingrich takeover of Congress, which was the beginning of this extremist turn in the Republican Party. One of the things people forget is that attacking immigrants was very much part of the agenda. There was a draconian crackdown on public benefits for immigrants as part of the welfare bill. I know that George Soros was incensed by that. Did he see himself as battling the Republicans at that point? Or was he still taking this more open-society, nonpartisan view of things?

**Gara:** His political profile, which, of course, was not through the foundation, didn't come into a larger public view until around the time of the 2004 election. George was a political donor. He leaned Democrat. He gave money to candidates. He wasn't that interested in politics.

In 1994-6, George saw himself, and the foundation, as very much kind of a non-partisan and non-ideological place. It was also the kind of place where, if you had a good idea about something that wasn't in the plan, you could go to him and he might very well do it.

That's how we got the criminal justice work done. It wasn't something George was particularly passionate or knowledgeable about, but [Open Society President] Aryeh Neier and I had come out of the ACLU and out of Human Rights Watch. We were very concerned about mass incarceration.

When we started doing the criminal justice work in 1996, there was virtually no foundation that was funding criminal justice reform. But it wasn't a George passion. It was a passion of ours.

**David:** Looking back at that early Soros philanthropy in the U.S., I'm struck by how much of it was bold, taking on issues that nobody was touching. Criminal justice reform is now a very hot issue, but at that time, almost nobody was touching it. This was still during this period when the war on crime was in full swing with bipartisan support.

Another issue, of course, is drug legalization, and Soros was one of the first people on the scene there. Flash forward to today, marijuana is legal for all adults in 34 states. Another was marriage equality. I know that back then, there were not a lot of funders who were in that area. How did that come about?

**Gara:** A mantra in philanthropy most foundations follow is that you need to have partners to do things and you want to have a collaboration. Very often, funders don't want to be the first [to back work on an issue], particularly if it's something controversial. When I think back on Soros, over time, I think we acquired partners and we made it safe for other people to do it. Now, of course, Open Society is not leading criminal justice reform. There are probably a couple of dozen foundations, including all of the significant mainstream foundations like Ford.

I don't think we ever would have done the work on the drug policy reform or criminal justice had we waited for partners. We just had to do it and spend, and I sometimes wonder, particularly with rich people, why they don't just get out there and start it and wait for others to follow. That's what we did anyway.

I don't even know how aware of marriage equality George was. We didn't fund marriage equality, anything like the scale that we funded other things. A lot of individual donors were out there on marriage equality and they had the Civil Marriage Collaborative [at the Proteus Fund]. We were a little late to that party in the sense that we didn't start it. We were early as a non-LGBT funder. We probably were the first significant non-LGBT funder, except possibly the Haas Jr. Foundation in San Francisco.

As is so often the case in philanthropy, there was a little bit of serendipity involved. Evan Wolfson, who had been a lawyer at Lambda Legal Defense, was starting this rather audacious plan to make marriage equality legal. Evan, who I didn't know, came and talked to me. He laid it all out. I had been quite skeptical. I'd been involved all through my life in LGBT issues and served on the board of an LGBT organization, but it seemed a little audacious to me. I wasn't sure that, even for us, it made sense, but I was struck by how serious his plan was. I listened with an open mind. Then I had a meeting with Aryeh, and Aryeh being an ACLU type, asked a lot of questions. But Aryeh, who started skeptical, also was persuaded that this was something that could work. So we put a couple hundred thousand dollars in, whatever it was at the time, and we joined the Civil Marriage Collaborative.

**David:** You spent more than a decade at Open Society. It's a pretty impressive track record when you think about where things are today — marijuana is legal in many states, marriage equality is the law of the land, and mass incarceration is on the very front burner of the political agenda.

**Gara:** Not to mention the fact that there's been a big change in the culture of dying, the culture of end-of-life care.

**David:** I want to turn to the Democracy Alliance, that's where you've been for the last seven years. Some of our listeners will know about the DA, others will not. So, what does it do, and how is it organized?

**Gara:** The DA was founded 15 years ago. It is an association of donors. It's about a hundred high-net-worth individuals, eight or nine labor unions, and 15 or so progressive foundations. They're aligned around trying to build a stronger progressive infrastructure. It was founded by a guy named Rob Stein about 15 years ago. What he did was, he took the research that had been done by him and others on the infrastructure the right had built: think tanks, legal groups like Federalist Society, leadership institutes, things like that. He mapped out what they had done and how they had done it. He laid it all out for progressive donors and said we should band together to create some alternatives. That was the basic operating premise of it.

The DA funded a number of significant new institutions on the left, like the Center for American Progress, the American Constitution Society—which is the counterpart to the Federalist Society—and Media Matters for America, which monitors the media. At the same time, we took a look at some groups that already existed that were significant, like the Brennan Center for Justice or the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Both those organizations were exclusively funded by foundations, but they had no individual donors to speak of, and so we helped them diversify their donor base and work more closely with other groups.

The business model for the DA is that these donors pay dues for our advice to be part of our group. In the past, we've had semi-annual conferences that are like a crossroads for the progressive movement. We assess the landscape, make recommendations for investments, and then donors, beyond their dues, agree to give at least a couple hundred thousand dollars a year to organizations that we recommend to them.

**David:** You spent a lot of time on the road in the last seven years trying to recruit new donors to the Democracy Alliance. What kind of rich person throws in their hat with a hard-hitting progressive organization, with a lot of labor unions involved? What's the profile of your donor who says "yes" when you show up on a recruitment call to join the Democracy Alliance? And what kind of a wealthy person is much less likely to get involved?

**Gara:** I've operated on the premise that my own views are more on the left wing of the Democratic Party, the kind of Warren wing. The DA itself ought to be a relatively big tent to progressives. I have not wanted it to be a sectarian institution, in that you're not welcome here if you don't have the same view as everybody else.

The DA's own strategies have moved several notches to the left as the donor class has as a whole. We've had something to do with moving donors in a certain direction, around the economy, around race and gender, but I've tried to keep it a big tent. In that sense, I don't know that there's a typical DA donor. We have everybody from social justice progressives, who are fundamentally concerned with grassroots action, to people who are more comfortable with think tanks and policy-type work.

Among the individual donors, there are people who are very active and have clear strategies for their own philanthropy and their own political giving. They're eager to be part of a community where they can interact with others and they can help get partners for their own passions. There's plenty of those who are more sophisticated, if that's the right word, who really have thought a lot

about it. We also have a lot of donors who joined the DA because they're just becoming active philanthropically. They have more time to devote to it, they want help sorting through the landscape, and they want to learn about things. They want us to influence their giving and help to shape it. Obviously, I like that kind of donor very much because they really want to learn.

We have a fairly high retention rate. People like what they're getting. I found over the years that when I started the job, I talked to all the donors one-on-one to get a sense of what their expectations of the DA were. I was a little surprised to find that of the two pieces of the value proposition for the Democracy Alliance—strategic coordinated funding and community—they want to be in a group of folks who share their values and they can learn from, and that's particularly important for the kinds of donors we have in red states.

We have people who are progressives in red places who really like being with people who share their values, where they don't have to hide them. Then we have plenty of people from the two coasts who live in relative bubbles. It's a more eclectic group than you might think.

I've seen all of my jobs over the last 25 years as trying to redistribute money from wealthy people to social justice causes, particularly those led by grassroots.

**David:** Progressive politics has changed a lot since you first arrived at the Democracy Alliance seven years ago. There has been a huge influx of movement, activists, including many younger people of color, and issues of race have moved much more front and center. On the other hand, we still have this donor class that is very wealthy, largely white, typically older. There are very different lived experiences here between the donor class and the activist class. This seems like a potentially challenging kind of partnership to manage. You've had a front-row seat to this at the Democracy Alliance through your convenings, bringing together these different worlds. How has that played out?

**Gara:** Seven years ago, the DA was primarily a white institution. Certainly, that was true of the donors, most of the staff, and disproportionately, the groups that we recommended for funding.

[More recently,] the staff has been at times two-thirds people of color. The staffing is different. I'm pretty sure that more than half of the groups in the [grantmaking] portfolio are led by people of color and include people of color organizations. We have a new American majority fund, and a climate and equity fund that only funds BIPOC groups at the grassroots level. The people speaking at the conferences are an extremely diverse group.

The lagging indicator is the composition of the donors. We have tried to recruit donors of color. Four of our 12 board members are people of color, so that is a big change from 10 years ago. We have a ways to go on the donor front.

I think most of the [other] progressive donor networks would be in roughly the same situation. More of the money is white and more of the places the money goes to are BIPOC organizations. It's something to continue to work on. It probably requires changes in institutional culture in ways that are structural. In light of the reckoning that we've all been through in the last year, I think we have a lot more work to do about that.

**David:** The Democracy Alliance was created 15 years ago to build up a progressive infrastructure. What do you see as the places where big gaps remain? What are the key

weaknesses, and how much more money do we really need to come to the table to address those gaps and strengthen that infrastructure to where it needs to be?

**Gara:** I feel pretty good about the way the needle has moved. If I had to say two things that we have not done well on, leadership development is one. I think there is very little at scale on the progressive side that trains leaders in the larger sense of being in a movement and having a movement career. I think the right has done that very well.

I've worked for progressive organizations all my life, and I've tried to be somebody with an eye for talent and moving people up and encouraging people to take on more. I feel good for what I've been able to do personally in that. But almost no institution that I've been affiliated with has a real structural approach to that. I think that, movement-wide and institution-wide, we are very poor at leadership development.

The other piece of it, and I have mixed feelings on this, is media. If you look at the big difference between the right and us, it's that they have a media infrastructure, with Fox, Newsmax and so on. It's an ecosystem that gives us a hard time and also promotes their messages. There was a symbiotic relationship between a lot of these outlets in the Trump administration. We don't have anything like that.

I guess where I have mixed feelings is, I don't know whether we should, in the same way. Progressives have a different set of values. I don't think it's simply a matter of creating some parallel propaganda network. I'll close by saying that one of the curious things in my view about progressive donors is how few of them have had a serious interest in putting money into media and communications. People came while I was there, and probably in the years since, to Soros, saying, why don't you buy CNN or this or that, and George, because he's an open society and anti-propaganda guy, who's always been resistant, he's never wanted to do that.

**David:** I would add that it seems there's more investment needed in a legal infrastructure, if you look at the Federalist Society and its power. I still don't think that the think tank gap has been closed. Heritage Foundation's budget is twice the budget of CAP. AEI, Cato—these are much bigger institutions than a Demos or a Roosevelt Institute.

**Gara:** Yeah, well, I wasn't trying to be exhaustive, and I don't disagree. There are still gaps, but I think we've done a better job in creating the ideas piece of it than the other piece of it. The other thing is that we have way underinvested in people of color organizations.

It's a struggle for all kinds of donors to get money for grassroots organizations and people-of-color-led organizations. The dollars have not matched the rhetoric yet in the progressive donor world. In the last year, I think that's begun to change in significant ways. A lot of big foundations have made significant investments. It's late in coming.

**David:** That's a hopeful note to close on, Gara. Thank you very much for coming on the show.

**Gara:** Thank you for having me. I really enjoy talking to you and I'm a big admirer of the work you're doing. I look forward to more conversations.