

**The McPolicy Network:
The Marketing of Conservative Ideas by State-Level Think-Tanks**

Val Burris
vburris@oregon.uoregon.edu

- 1) Rise of right-wing think tanks at federal level in 1970s and early 1980s (Heritage, Cato, Hoover, AEI)
- 2) Shift toward state-level think tanks in the late 1980s and 1990s
 - a) Prior to mid-1980s, state level right-wing organizations were mainly of two types:
 - i) Christian Right “family councils” (anti-gay, anti-abortion)
 - ii) Taxpayer’s unions (anti-property-tax initiatives)
 - b) Heartland Institute (Chicago) founded in 1984 with money from Scaife, Koch, and Bradley, as early model of a Heritage-type institute at the state level
 - c) Major growth wave in 1984-1995; franchising operation based on common model
 - i) Midwest: Wisconsin Policy Research Inst, Mackinac Ctr (MI), Center for Amer Experiment (MN)
 - ii) West: Cascade Policy Inst (OR), Evergreen Freedom Fdn (WA), Claremont Inst (CA), Pacific Res Inst (CA), Goldwater Inst (AZ), Independence Inst (CO)
 - iii) East: Allegheny Inst (PA), Empire Fdn (NY), Beacon Hill Inst (MA), Ethan Allen Inst (VT)
 - iv) South: Texas Public Policy Fdn, Alabama Policy Inst; Georgia Public Policy Fdn, John Locke Fdn (NC), James Madison Inst (FL),
 - d) State Policy Network (SPN) founded by Thomas Roe (SC businessman) in 1992 as successor to Madison Group (1986); now consists of more than 40 affiliated institutes
 - e) Groups vary in size (\$500,000 is typical) and ideology (more later)
- 3) Common characteristics:
 - a) Advocacy of “free market solutions” to public policy issues, especially in schooling, government services, health care, and environment.
 - b) Close connections with Republican legislators; service in Republican administrations; walk a fine line in maintaining their “non-partisan” tax exempt status.
 - c) Little research conducted; mainly involved in marketing pre-packaged policy initiatives through media outreach: op-ed pieces, pamphlets, radio broadcasts, etc.

- d) Attempt to legitimate themselves as reputable “experts” through sponsorship of occasional academically reputable research (mainly surveys) and recruitment of “academic advisory councils” (largely window dressing of local retired professors).
- 4) Dense network of connections among conservative policy planning groups:
- a) Associate member organizations at the federal level (Heritage, Cato, Americans for Tax Reform, American Legislative Exchange Council, Free Congress Foundation)
 - b) Common sources of funding: Scaife, Koch, Bradley, Coors (also Olin, JM,
 - c) Interlocking directors among state think tanks, federal think tanks, right-wing foundations and funders
 - d) Flow of personnel among state groups and between state and national groups
- 5) Key points that come from the study of these organizations:
- a) Policy planning is mainly a commercial (rather than intellectual) activity
 - b) Differences on social issues are inconsequential to the economic interests that bankroll these activities — mainly used to target message to different cultural/political niches
 - c) Strategic importance of state level policy institutes.
 - d) Central place of school privatization in the broader right-wing agenda
- 6) Commercial nature of state-level policy planning:
- a) Emphasis on fundraising from corporations (foundations provide seed money).
 - b) Targeting of issues to appeal to specific business interests:
 - i) Telecommunications: deregulation and support for mergers.
 - ii) Financial services and insurance: privatizing Social Security; attacks on national health insurance, deregulation of auto insurance, medical savings accounts (Golden Rule Insurance Co.)
 - iii) Chemical, oil, auto, mining, lumber industry: free-market environmentalism.
 - iv) Pharmaceutical industry: opposing state medical plan restrictions on name-brand drugs.
 - c) Strategic use of trustees as sources of funding rather than sources of expertise.
 - d) State-level institutes as franchise operations.
 - i) Often initiated by other institutes or their personnel (pyramid scheme)

- ii) Common organizational structure of issue-focused “centers” (typically single staff member)
 - iii) Pre-packaged policy initiatives and promotional literature from other state and federal institutes
 - iv) Borrowing or replicating policy initiatives from state and federal think tanks
 - (1) *Mandate for Leadership* (Heritage) format for guides for state agencies
 - (2) Better government competitions (Cascade example)
- 7) Social issues as marketing ploy (economic conservatism as main objective):
 - a) Some groups espouse libertarian ideas (Free-market.net)
 - b) Others promote Christian Right social conservatism (Family Policy Councils)
 - c) Mutually exclusive ideologies on censorship, abortion, gay rights, drug legalization
 - d) Nevertheless, much overlap in funding and leadership (e.g., Coors, Roe)
 - e) Rising importance of libertarianism; declining significance of social conservatism (e.g., Alabama Family Alliance becomes Alabama Policy Institute).
- 8) Strategic importance of state level think tanks
 - a) Often able to achieve more right-wing policies than would be possible at the federal level (conservatism of state legislatures, regional concentrations of cultural conservatives)
 - b) State level policy initiatives often serve as “proving grounds” or “demonstration projects” for subsequent federal policies (e.g., Wisconsin welfare reform, Ohio school vouchers. California anti-affirmative action initiatives)
- 9) Significance of school privatization (as well as privatization of other government services) for the larger balance of political power within the states and nationally. Assault on NEA, AFSCME, and other state employee unions — typically the most well-funded and well-organized defenders of working-class interests.