



Why U.S. Conservatives Shape Legislation across the Fifty States Much More Effectively than Liberals

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Always important, the policy clout of the fifty U.S. states has arguably grown in recent years. As gridlock and deficits hamstring Washington DC, innovations sometimes spread across many states – and recent national initiatives such as health reform and tightened clean air standards depend on state implementation. To promote a coordinated policy agenda in many statehouses, conservatives leverage longstanding, well-funded networks of organizations. Liberals, on the other hand, started later and made fitful and incomplete progress at building trans-state policy networks. Only now are they marshalling new resources with a sense of strategic urgency.

Longstanding, Strategically Integrated Conservative Networks

In the 1970s and 1980s, conservative foundations and wealthy patrons funded intertwined cross-state networks of organizations able to formulate and promote model legislation across the states.

- Founded in 1973, the **American Legislative Exchange Council** – called “ALEC” – spreads “model bills” to lower taxes, remove regulations, cut and privatize public services, and disempower labor unions. Legislators and businesses pay dues to join and serve on task forces to draft model bills, which the organization promotes and helps legislators tailor for their states. Annual meetings attract thousands of state legislators and corporate representatives as well as representatives of conservative think tanks and advocacy groups.
- Growing from precursors started in 1986 and 1992, the **State Policy Network** was revamped in 1998 to support state think tanks in the mold of the Heritage Foundation. It provides training plus media and fundraising support, and has grown from 12 to 65 think tanks in addition to hundreds of affiliated organizations in all fifty states. Member groups usually join ALEC, participate in its task forces, and produce research and commentary that supports ALEC model bills in their home states.

Struggles and Fragmentation on the Left

In fits and starts, liberal activists, academics, and DC policy research organizations have relied on intermittent and modest foundation funding to build left-leaning state policy networks.

- One lineage started with the National Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies, founded in 1975 under the auspices of the DC-based Institute for Policy Studies. This involved between 600 and 2000 state legislators, but then narrowed into the Center for Policy Alternatives, which wound up focusing on training and closed in the 2000s.

- Two robust, still-functioning networks were launched in the 1990s. Started in 1993 by the DC-based Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative, now called the **State Priorities Partnership**, provides support for some 41 state groups doing research on budgets and programs for low-income Americans. With a somewhat broader purview, the **Economic Analysis and Research Network** includes about 61 policy organizations encouraged by the DC-based, union-connected Economic Policy Institute. Legislators are not members of these networks, which tend to focus on spreading research and building coalitions. About 31 state groups are affiliated with both networks.
- In 2014, progressive philanthropists amassed millions to found the **State Innovation Exchange**, which aspires to become a full competitor to the right. The new group absorbed three 2000s start-ups, including the American Legislative and Issue Campaign Exchange, which bequeathed to it a large online “library” of progressive bills.

Why the Difference?

Several factors help to explain why the right has been much more successful than the left.

- **Funding levels for network coordinators contrast sharply.** Historically, conservative groups like ALEC and the State Policy Network have enjoyed higher levels of consistent funding than networks on the left.
- **Funding sources and trajectories promoted integrated political activism on the right.** Conservatives diversified funding early, moving from ideological and interventionist philanthropists to multiple, shifting corporate sponsors. Left network builders had to raise short-term grants from foundations and compete for scarce resources within their linchpin DC organizations. Foundations shied away from left political engagement, but right funders cheered integrated political strategies and channeled extra grants to state affiliates.
- **Post-1960s liberals have focused on national power and many causes and constituencies.** In the late twentieth century, U.S. conservatives focused on building local, state, and legislative power, while liberals looked to the White House, court cases, and national legislation. Right actors also find it easier to proclaim shared goals and values while post-1960s liberals speak for many different constituencies and policy causes.

What Next?

Conservative state policy networks have, at times, run into trouble with corporate funders, who may withdraw during public controversies – including attacks by the left or media firestorms like the one that broke out around about the “Stand Your Ground” gun laws ALEC had promoted. Nevertheless, right-leaning networks are still flush and enjoy new opportunities to move model bills and attract members after the 2014 elections installed Republicans in two-thirds of all state legislative posts.

On the left, the State Innovation Exchange can look forward to up to \$10 million per year from progressive philanthropists. But its existing organizational allies favor many causes and have only sparse presence in the South, Midwest, and inner West. In the dozens of states where liberals are not strong, network building and outreach to legislators will be needed for years to come – and state groups will have to move beyond previous grooves to make much headway.

Read more in Alex Hertel-Fernandez, "Funding the State Policy Battleground: The Role of Foundations and Firms," Duke University Symposium on Philanthropy, Politics, and Democracy, January 2015.