

THE SHIFTING U.S. POLITICAL TERRAIN

Research Project, Harvard University

Launched in the spring of 2015, the **Shifting Terrain project** documents and seeks to explain recent major transformations in U.S. national and state politics and public policymaking. The project addresses several overarching questions:

- In recent years, how have ultra-conservatives reorganized and gained new leverage over and through the Republican Party, pushing that party much further to the right than standard analyses of public attitudes would lead us to expect?
- How have advocacy groups, constituency organizations, and donor networks shifted in and around the Democratic Party?
- In what ways have the reorganized U.S. right and left influenced policymaking and contributed to asymmetric partisan polarization, government gridlock, growing public distrust, and rising economic inequality?

Investigations are led by Harvard Professor Theda Skocpol, working in collaboration with Dr. Vanessa Williamson of the Brookings Institution; Alex Hertel-Fernandez, PhD candidate in Government and Social Policy at Harvard; and Harvard graduate students in Government Jason Sclar, Angie Bautista-Chavez, and Sarah James.

Researchers are analyzing data from archives, organizational web sites, field observations of events and meetings, and interviews with key political leaders and activists. Moving beyond the usual emphasis on individual-level electoral, attitudinal, and demographic data, the project explores shifting arrays of organizations over time, documents elite careers within and across organizations, and focuses on organized consortia of political donors (not just individual billionaires and millionaires).

Component Investigations

- **Compiling new data on conservative and progressive consortia of political donors.** How did the conservative Koch network, the progressive Democracy Alliance, and other donor consortia develop, and how do they operate? Who participates? And what impact have such consortia had on party agendas and goals?
- **Compiling new data on advocacy, issue, and constituency organizations in and around the two major political parties,** with an emphasis on organizational staffing, capacities, and national or federated structures.
- **Developing fresh indicators of organizations, coalitions, and policymaking in and across the fifty U.S. states,** including:

- Data on **cross-state policy networks** – the conservative *State Policy Network* and center-left efforts such as the *Economic Analysis Research Network* and the *State Priorities Partnership*.
 - Data on the development, successes, and shortfalls of organized efforts to influence legislation across states, including by the right-leaning, business-oriented *American Legislative Exchange Council (“ALEC”)* and the recently launched progressive *State Innovation Exchange (“SiX”)*.
 - Tracking capacities for *Americans for Prosperity*, the most ambitious and far-flung conservative organization active during and between elections.
 - Tracking the membership and organizational capacity of *unions and other labor organizations* compared to *business associations*.
 - Tracking capacities, goals, and alliances of *issue organizations and non-profits oriented to specific constituencies*.
- Reviewing literatures on **Latino civic and electoral participation** and assembling new data on the goals, capacities, and effectiveness of organizations engaged in targeted efforts to mobilize this crucial new swing constituency.
 - **Analyzing ongoing battles over the expansion of Medicaid**, combining statistical modelling with in-depth case studies of **Michigan, Missouri, Virginia, and Indiana**, focusing mainly on the clash of Republican factions.
 - Conducting **in-depth case studies of recent policy and political conflicts in Kansas, North Carolina, and Wisconsin** – where monopoly GOP governments have undertaken radical changes in taxes, regulations, social policies, voting rules, and union rights. How have conflicts over such matters unfolded, not just between the two major parties but among warring business, citizen, and ideological factions within the Republican Party?