

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 grown in recent years. As gridlock hamstringing Washington DC, innovations sometimes spread across states – which also play key roles in voting rights, health reform, labor laws, and climate regulations. To promote coordinated agendas in statehouses, conservatives can leverage longstanding, well-funded networks, while liberals started later and have made only fitful progress at building their own policy networks.

Longstanding, Strategically Integrated Conservative Networks

Conservative donors have funded three cross-state networks of organizations able to formulate and promote legislation across the states in complementary and reinforcing ways.

- 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 those 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 and hundreds of affiliated organizations in all fifty states. Member groups participate in ALEC task forces and produce research and commentary supporting its model bills in their home states.
- **Americans for Prosperity** is the third part of the conservative troika. Central to the political network run by libertarian billionaires Charles and David Koch, this federated organization launched in 2004 now has paid directors and staff in 34 states, with resources to lobby policymakers, mobilize activists, and run political advertisements. It aims to defeat Democrats, elect GOP state and federal lawmakers, and pressure GOP politicians to further right-wing policy priorities, including ALEC model bills and proposals from free-market think tanks.

Struggles and Fragmentation on the Left

In fits and starts, liberal activists, academics, and DC policy organizations have used intermittent and modest funding from foundations and labor unions to build left-leaning 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 effort later turned into the **Center for Policy Alternatives**, which enjoyed rapid growth in the late 1990s before diminished funding forced it to scale back and cease operations by the mid-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 groups in some 41 states and the District of Columbia 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 35 state groups are affiliated with both networks.
- In 2014, progressive philanthropists amassed seed funds to found the **State Innovation Exchange**, which aspires to become a competitor to ALEC. The new group absorbed three floundering 2000s-era left-leaning start-ups, including the **American Legislative and Issue Campaign Exchange**, which bequeathed to it a large online “library” of progressive bills.

Why the Difference – And What Can Progressives Learn?

Several factors help to explain why the right has been much more successful than the left and hint at lessons that progressives can learn from conservative groups.

- ***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. Although it is true that the right enjoys access to corporate funding that liberal cross-state groups cannot expect to attract, progressive leaders could still devise creative ways to finance their organizations while building broad and engaged memberships. For instance, liberal groups could collect annual dues on sliding scales from participating state and local lawmakers, foundations, unions, and other groups.
- ***Networks on the right, but not the left, have mechanisms to manage competing priorities.*** Both left and right leaders of state networks must reconcile numerous competing priorities. But conservatives have established organizational solutions to manage such conflicts. ALEC delegates decision-making to task forces in which the firms, advocates, and lawmakers most invested in an issue area set their own policy agendas. The State Innovation Exchange might consider sorting constituents into task forces of its own, focused on challenges such as criminal justice reforms, health and education, climate change, and support for working families.
- ***Conservatives use policies to build political clout.*** Conservative networks pursue policies not just as expertly designed substantive measures but to reshape political landscapes. Good examples include legal changes to make voting more difficult and the right’s relentless focus on weakening public sector labor unions. In stark contrast, liberals rarely view policies this way, even shying away from fighting for the full implementation of health reform in the states where victories or sustained efforts could yield political dividends for the left.

What Next?

Although right networks have run into trouble pushing controversial measures like “Stand Your Ground” gun laws, they are still flush with cash and large memberships and enjoy many opportunities to move bills in dozens of Republican-dominated states. Liberal state network-builders would do well to adapt organizational tactics from their conservative counterparts.

Read more in Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and Theda Skocpol, “[How the Right Trowned Liberals in the States](#),” *Democracy Journal* 38, Fall 2015.