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Donald Trump's policy-free approach befuddles D.C. think tanks

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WASHINGTON – Bewilderment. Incredulity. And even grief. These are some of the emotions coursing through the well-appointed conference rooms and offices of Washington's powerful think tanks when it comes to Donald Trump.

Evaluating and advocating policy positions is a big business in Washington, fueled by scores of academics, former administration officials, and other wonks housed in hundreds of think tanks spanning the ideological spectrum.

They are part of Washington's establishment in a year when the likely Republican nominee is running against the establishment to the point of dismissing serious policy discussions as boring. His candidacy leaves experts of all political stripes wondering how to get their arms around his platform, or even what their role will be in the upcoming general election.

“In a sense he's running against Brookings, or running against AEI (the American Enterprise Institute),” said Mark Calabria, director of financial regulation studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. “That's his whole spiel of, ‘You've got a bunch of incompetent nincompoops in Washington who've screwed things up, I'm going to clean house, and bring in the A team.’ ”

His campaign does not appear to have engaged in any substantial outreach to rightward-orientated think tanks and experts that a typical GOP candidate would court. Few experts in close-knit policy circles say they've heard from the Trump campaign, or even know who is advising him on key issues.

Some scholars at Washington's think tanks are sticking with a business-as-usual approach, applying their sophisticated models and assigning PhD-laden staffs to research the handful of policy ideas Trump has tossed out.

Others don't see the point. “When you say you want to deport 11 million people in 18 months, when you say you want to renegotiate U.S. debt ... it's just not accurate to describe that as a policy proposal,” said Michael Strain, a vocal Trump critic who is the director of economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a leading conservative think tank.

“It doesn’t count as public policy; instead it’s just a primal scream and those are different.”

The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

Some analysts have tried to weigh Trump’s immigration plan, which includes building a wall with Mexico — that Mexico will pay for — and the rapid deportation of 11 million undocumented immigrants. This work has largely argued that Trump’s plan would be a disaster.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s just all wrong,” is what went through the mind of American Action Forum President Douglas Holtz-Eakin when he heard Trump claim he could deport so many people, so quickly, and not damage the economy.

Based on work his team had done previously on immigration issues, Holtz-Eakin knew expelling all undocumented workers would be a far greater undertaking than Trump described. Despite its outlandishness, he asked his team to review it. “I just said, ‘Do this. We know that’s not right, so do the work, tell us exactly what the right answer is,’” said Holtz-Eakin, who served as chief economic adviser to John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign.

The conclusion of the paper Holtz-Eakin’s outfit produced in February: Trump’s plan to remove all undocumented immigrants would cost tax payers as much as \$300 billion, monumentally swell the ranks of US immigration personnel, and dramatically shrink the economy.

Likewise, several groups have generated price tags for Trump’s \$10 trillion tax-cut plan, one of the most detailed proposals the real estate mogul has issued. But even with a relatively fleshed-out plan, Trump and his campaign have still managed to sow confusion. As outlined on his website, wealthy taxpayers would get a big tax cut under his plan. Then earlier this month, Trump made comments suggesting rich taxpayers would see tax increases. He then said he would revise his plan to give wealthy folks a less-generous cut.

Trump’s own advisers have gotten caught up in the back-and-forth. CNBC personality Larry Kudlow and Stephen Moore, an economic commentator and visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation, have discussed some tax plan “tweaks,” as they term them, with Trump and his team that they say could cut in half the estimated cost.

News reports of the discussions prompted a Trump spokeswoman to say the mogul planned no changes to the proposal.

“Look, I don’t know for sure, I’m not going to contradict what that person said,” Moore said in an interview. “Our conversations have been very positive. They seem very appreciative and very open minded to the ideas we put forward.” He said he and Kudlow have continued to talk with the Trump campaign.

Trump has particularly roiled the foreign policy world, where thinkers on both sides of the partisan aisle are appalled by many of the GOP nominee’s statements and positions.

“This is how fascism comes to America,” former Reagan State Department official Robert Kagan, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, penned in a Washington Post op-ed earlier this month. “Not with jackboots and salutes . . . but with a television huckster.”

These sentiments have led in some cases to activism rather than think-pieces. In March, more than 50 Republican foreign policy leaders signed an open letter publicly opposing a Trump presidency because he would “make America less safe.”

Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the left-leaning Center for American Progress, said he struggles to evaluate Trump. What would he do if confronted with a real-world problem, such as an aggressive move by Russia, whose leader he has praised? “Because he just doesn’t fit into a particular box, its hard to evaluate what he would actually do” as president, Katulis said. “As a policy matter he’s a big jumble of a mess of problems. ... And to fight back against that [intellectually] is going to be a big challenge.”

Even on the left side of the intellectual policy spectrum there are calls to avoid underestimating Trump.

There’s a swath of the think-tank world who approach him with “a combination of mockery and bewilderment,” said Heather Hurlburt, director of the New Models of Policy Change at the non-partisan New America Foundation and a former Clinton administration official. “Which, just for the record, I personally disagree with. The guy is enough a master of the American political process to get nominated by one of our two political parties; you really need to take him seriously.”

The Trump phenomenon has also heightened anxiety among policy intellectuals about how to toe the line between policy advocacy and political activism, Hurlburt said. Their tax exempt status means think tanks aren’t allowed to engage in election-related activities. But the foreign policy ideas and outcomes that so many wonks are worried about are almost uniquely associated with Trump.

“If you think what’s at stake in the election is the demise of the liberal international system, but taking a position on that edges you closer to what your tax lawyers are telling you what you can’t do, that’s a struggle for executives at think tanks.”