

Think tanks jockey for influence

WASHINGTON -- When more than 80 newly elected Republican members of Congress arrived here for freshmen orientation, the Heritage Foundation was waiting to welcome them.

The conservative think tank hosted a conference in Baltimore last fall that newly elected Rep. Allen West, R-Fla., called "an incredible two days of intense policy discussion with a panel of superb thinkers and leaders."

For Heritage, which advocates repealing the new health care law and freezing federal spending, the outreach effort was an attempt to influence the nation's newest lawmakers as they begin debate on what direction the federal government should take for the next two years.

It's the kind of effort that will be repeated by dozens of other think tanks, which will hold conferences, seminars and workshops offering themselves up as policy muses to members of Congress looking to outside experts for help in drawing up legislation and solving problems.

For the policy wonks, academics, former government officials and researchers who make up the nonprofit think tanks, it's all about trying to ensure that they make a mark on the issues they care about most. It also helps them raise money from foundations and individual donors when they can show that they have helped shape federal policy.

"It comes down to who can present the right ideas at the right time to the right people," said Donald Abelson, director of the Centre for American Studies at The University of Western Ontario in Canada.

For think tanks, there is more than bragging rights at stake when the president or a member of Congress quotes their research or one of their experts appears on a Sunday news talk show or cable news channel.

Think tanks have played a major role in shaping domestic and foreign policy, said James McGann, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program.

Among the biggest successes he cited: the Brookings Institution was key in coming up with the idea for the economic stimulus package, while the Center for American Progress played a big role in making the case for health care reform and repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy for gays in the military. Heritage and the Cato Institute offered conservatives a counter argument to the Democrats' health care and economic recovery plans, and RAND Corp. pioneered the idea of the nation's all-volunteer Army.

The competition to present ideas to members of Congress and the White House is fierce in a nation that boasts more than 1,800 think tanks - far more than any other country in the world. China, which ranks second, has 425 think tanks.

In Washington, D.C., alone, there are nearly 400 think tanks doing research on everything from missile defense to school vouchers, according to a report on "The Global 'Go-To Think Tanks' " authored by McGann and released this year by the University of Pennsylvania.

Every time a new Congress gathers or a new president moves into the White House, think tanks try to seize on the opportunity to mentor the fresh-faced leaders. One of the biggest questions this year is which think tanks will attract the attention of the new members of Congress who ran as tea party outsiders and view Washington institutions warily.

While the Heritage Foundation attracts conservatives, the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute may appeal more to anti-establishment tea party lawmakers, because it criticizes both Republicans and Democrats, McGann said.

"It's too soon to tell to what degree the tea party will be influenced and incorporated into these establishment institutions or to what degree the tea party's agenda may change them," McGann said.

While conservative think tanks may benefit from the Republican takeover of the House, centrist and liberal groups will continue to have influence with the White House and the Democratic-led Senate, McGann said.

Among the think tanks that President Barack Obama turns to most often are the Brookings Institution, which is considered slightly left of center in its ideology, and the Center for American Progress, a much more liberal group headed by John Podesta. Podesta is the former chief of staff for President Bill Clinton and co-chaired Obama's transition team.

Obama chose Brookings as the backdrop for a major speech he gave in December 2009 on jobs and the economy. He has become so identified with the think tank that, in a much-quoted Newsweek piece published in January, editor Jon Meacham said Obama's cool, intellectual demeanor sometimes makes him seem "to be running the Brookings Institution, not the country."

Think tanks have more power in the United States than in any other country in because Americans have a unique aversion to government bureaucrats and have more respect for independent experts, Abelson said.

Americans also have a strong tradition of donating to nonprofit groups, a practice encouraged by U.S. tax policy, the Canadian professor said.

Most think tanks rely solely on private donations from individuals, charitable foundations and corporations. A few get public funding from the U.S. government, including RAND, which has received money from the Defense Department, the Health and Human Services Department, the Army and the Air Force. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has received funding from the State Department.

"I don't think any other country in the world provides more fertile soil for think tanks to proliferate," Abelson said.

Still, the influence of think tanks on the federal government pales in comparison to the influence of corporate lobbyists working for companies that give campaign contributions to lawmakers, said Andrew Rich, president and CEO of the Roosevelt Institute, a liberal New York-based think tank that focuses on economic issues.

Think tanks, because of their nonprofit status, are prohibited from endorsing political candidates or contributing to their campaigns. All they can do is offer up research that they hope will sway a policy maker's mind.

"I wish that think tanks played a stronger role in the development of policy," said Rich, the former chairman of the political science department at City College of New York. "It's been discouraging to me, the extent to which money dominates politics. It's hard to counter that influence."

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