

# The Washington Post

## Why the American Enterprise Institute chief is so popular

By Jennifer Rubin, Updated: April 2 at 1:00 pm

We have been [covering](#) for [over a year](#) the emergence of the American Enterprise Institute as the dominant conservative think tank and the [descent](#) of the [Heritage Foundation](#), accelerated by [Jim DeMint's tenure](#), from respected thought leader to the poor stepsister to Heritage Action, the right-wing attack machine. [Newsweek](#) is the latest in a series of MSM stories to pick up on the development with a report that gets it mostly, but certainly not all right.

It does accurately capture the infectious enthusiasm and intellectual energy of its CEO, Arthur Brooks, and AEI's influential presence as a shaper of a new, positive conservative agenda:

AEI is on the rise. Its influence is growing on Capitol Hill, where Brooks, a former musician and college professor, is now a sought-after counsel to Republicans like House Budget Committee chairman and presidential hopeful Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va. Earlier this year, Brooks delivered the keynote address at both House and Senate GOP retreats.

"He's expanding the influence of AEI," said Representative Patrick McHenry, R – N.C. "His network on Capitol Hill has expanded greatly."

An aide to the Republican House leadership concurred. "It is amazing the number of individual members who will say, 'I was talking to Arthur the other day,' " the aide said. "I think members and staff are talking to AEI scholars more, consulting with AEI more today than probably they ever have."

The report, however, makes some errors. (For example, Heritage Action did not just begin "issuing scorecards that labeled lawmakers as insufficiently conservative.") And, of course, it doesn't bother with the content of those ideas, preferring simply to include a one-line slam against conservatives' inability to compare favorably to liberal solutions to poverty. "Democrats' position on that question is better for the poor," it quotes a journalist with utter seriousness. (*Really*, and which liberal solutions have been those?)

However, the article misses the mark most dramatically when it seems to discount the role of think tanks — indeed, of ideas — in politics. Rushing to academics (now there's a group who should know something about irrelevance), the report boldly proclaims that ideas don't matter:

“I think that think tanks now are just less relevant in terms of even what they are able to do. I really think we are entering into a period now where policy is fundamentally debated as a marker of identity. Policy has essentially become identity politics.”

**Huh?** But if one’s policy defines one’s identity, doesn’t that make policy important? If anything, the policy content AEI is creating makes identity politics less important. It isn’t what you label yourself (“Reaganite,” “commonsense conservative,” “tea partier”), but what you want *to do* that now defines figures on the right. Indeed, the labels are so overused that they have become entirely devoid of meaning.

Even more peculiar is the proposition offered by another academic that the GOP’s problem in 2012 wasn’t a compassion deficit but an economy that was on track. (“I think most political scientists say no, Romney lost because the economy was actually doing well enough to help an incumbent win reelection.”) That’s odd considering Obama’s entire campaign was focused on making Mitt Romney seem like a cold, heartless tycoon and exit polling showed by a huge margin voters concluded he didn’t care about people like them. The “don’t bother being compassionate” advice is confounding, to say the least.

What MSM outlets tend to miss in all these accounts is the centrality of ideas to the conservative movement. It’s not simply filler when Republicans talk about the constitution or free markets or Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s analysis of poverty. The reason so many Republicans claim to be ideological purists is that ideology plays a dominant role on the right in a way it no longer does on the left. The premier think tank on the left, the Center for American Progress, is essentially a cheering section and rubber stamp for the administration. The right, by contrast, has a boiling cauldron of ideas from AEI, the Cato Institute, the Hudson Institute, the Manhattan Institute, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and Commentary magazine (which published Brooks’s long essay discussed in the Newsweek piece). The right has had to create its own intellectual community since academia has generally been so hostile to conservative ideas — and it has been successful.

As politicians, Republicans shy away from constituency politics in favor of broad intellectual appeals, which may be a poor electoral tactic but underlies the importance of conservative ideas. Democrats assemble minorities, labor, women, the poor and youth to win elections while Republicans reach out to free-marketers, social conservatives, hawks, libertarians and reformers.

The reason AEI has succeeded beyond measure is that it has taken that passion for ideas and shown conservatives how that translates into policy and how that, in turn, also makes for good politics. The key to Brooks’s success, and I would argue to the success of conservatives, is to make the case that conservatism is good for *people*. It is important that upon his arrival Brooks reworked AEI’s mission. It now reads: “The American Enterprise Institute is a community of scholars and supporters committed to expanding liberty, increasing individual opportunity and strengthening free enterprise. AEI pursues these unchanging ideals through independent thinking, open debate, reasoned argument, facts and the highest standards of research and exposition. Without regard for politics or prevailing fashion, **we dedicate our work to a more prosperous, safer and more democratic nation and world.**” (Emphasis added.) In other

words, conservatives in Brooks's telling are in there to do good. And who doesn't want to do that?

In short, by explaining to conservatives how the ideas they hold dear are good policy and can be good politics, Brooks is providing the glue that ties conservatism to successful politics and good governance. It rebuts the attack on conservatives that they care only about money, and he addresses the electoral problem conservatives have faced in being caricatured as unfeeling. No wonder conservatives listen so carefully.