



## Power shifts in the 'think-tank-ocracy'

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Think tanks—from the Center for American Progress and Economic Policy Institute on the liberal side, to the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute on the conservative side—have played an important role in policymaking in recent decades.

Princeton University political historian Julian Zelizer said President Ronald Reagan ramped up the practice in the early 1980s. “He turned to conservative think tanks like Heritage (Foundation) for some of the actual proposals—literally drafted by them—during his first 100 Days,” said Zelizer.

Zelizer said that on the one hand, such a close relationship between conservative think tanks and the new Republican president would be surprising, given that President Donald Trump and many in his cabinet come from outside politics and aren't familiar with the Washington establishment.

“Someone like President Trump will be more skeptical of what the quote-unquote ‘experts’ have to say,” said Zelizer. But, he added, “when you have inexperience — both the president and cabinet officials scrambling to govern — that creates opportunities for savvy think tanks to sell their goods.”

Leading conservative think tanks, however, won't all have significant influence on policy, or the ears of Republican policy makers, according to budget analyst Stan Collender at the MSL Group in Washington, D.C.

“There are tremendous differences among the different Republican think tanks — everything from Heritage to AEI (American Enterprise Institute) to Cato (Institute),” said Collender, adding that the groups may disagree on what to do about free trade, globalization, immigration, the social safety net and other issues.

James McGann is director of the [Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program](#) at the University of Pennsylvania. He expects think tanks to continue shifting their focus in the Trump era. “There is a demand for action, in some respects, not ideas, driven by donors,” said McGann.

But, he added, in-depth research and analysis are still the basis for advocacy. And he predicted that countering fake news and fabricated data — especially via social media — will be a major new priority for all mainstream think tanks, regardless of their political persuasion.