



Heritage looks to the tea parties

The Washington think tank wants to expand its grassroots efforts.

By [Ambreen Ali](#)

The group that drafted many modern-era conservative ideas is taking a page from the tea parties.

For decades, conservative lawmakers have turned to Heritage Foundation for policy drafts on everything from health care to foreign policy.

Now the think tank is looking to build its grassroots base.

With the creation of the Heritage Action earlier this year, the foundation can legally lobby for its policies, mobilize the grassroots, and influence elections.

"People are starting to look at Heritage for leadership," said Mike Needham, who runs the new group.

"Washington is not staying true to the principles they believe in."

Together, the institutional power of the think tank and its new "do tank" of activists could wield more influence on Capitol Hill than ever before.

But the two groups also risk hurting each other. As the grassroots side grows, Heritage may be faced with a membership base that wants greater say in the policies the think tank produces.

"One of the strengths that the Heritage Foundation has is they haven't been swayed by their membership and donors," Needham said. "We stand for certain things."

Many of Heritage Action's members identify with the tea-party movement, which takes the opposite approach. Tea partyers pride themselves in being driven by their membership.

Response to the left

The rise in conservative activism wasn't the only reason for creating Heritage Action — it was also a response to the left.

Needham came up with the idea while watching the 2008 presidential election unfold. The Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, used its lobbying arm to wield great influence in that race.

Needham, who was in business school at the time, envisioned something similar for the right: a powerful lobbying group backed by Heritage's brand and reputation that could use the think tank's 700,000 members to launch issue campaigns that pressure lawmakers.

"What we're trying to do is communicate to millions of Americans across the country, 'Here are where the fights are, here's where the rubber meets the road in Washington and where the establishment versus the conservative are coming into conflict,'" he said.

In a less direct way, Heritage has been doing that all along.

When the think tank opened up shop in 1973, it challenged the think-tank establishment—led by the Brookings Institution's academic and centrist approach—with its advocacy bent.

Heritage wrote strategy specifically to influence lawmakers on the Hill, and it shared policy with a network of advocacy groups that mobilized campaigns around it.

"The arrival of Heritage really moved the whole industry to be more, in some sense, advocacy and certainly policy oriented," said James McGann, director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

That shift continued subtly until 2004, when the liberal Center for American Progress took the explicit step of creating a lobbying organization to run along its nonprofit think tank.

"The election of Obama was a validation in some senses of CAP and its effectiveness," McGann said.

The midterm election of 2010 may be the same for Heritage Action.

Push for repeal

Heritage Action kicked off six months ago with a full-on effort to repeal the health-care overhaul.

The group created a petition that in some ways has served as a litmus test for whether the politicians who voted against the health law are willing to stand by their decision and support its repeal.

As voters decide whether to back establishment lawmakers, Needham said it has been clarifying to see who is unwilling to back a discharge petition.

"We're going to see the repeal of Obama-care through until it happens," he said.

The campaign has exemplified how Heritage Action can enhance the think tank's efforts.

In the past, Heritage's role would have ended with a draft for how to repeal the bill. Now it is leading the fight to do so.

Heritage Action lobbyists are using their connections on the Hill to pressure lawmakers, while the grassroots team works to apply pressure from constituents.

Outside the establishment

Heritage Action has tried to pitch itself as the man on the inside for outside-the-Beltway groups like the tea parties.

"Successful political movements need a voice in Washington," Needham said.

But many outside groups see Heritage, with its firm roots in Washington, as part of the establishment.

"I think [Heritage] is part of the establishment," Jenny Beth Martin, a national coordinator for Tea Party Patriots, said. "That's why the information they are providing is so useful—because they are an insider."

Martin's group has worked with Heritage Action on securing signatures for the discharge petition.

"At the same time, we can't rely on them for the actions we're going to take," she added, "because the people outside D.C. don't have those Washington establishment relationships to maintain. They don't have to worry about that."

Inside-the-Beltway reputation

The establishment has had a mixed reaction to Heritage's new focus.

Groups such as Club for Growth, which backs fiscally conservative political candidates, have welcomed the extra help from them.

"It's going to take the fight to Congress and really put teeth into what Heritage does," Andy Roth, vice president of governmental affairs, said.

But some think tanks have turned up their noses at the idea of a grassroots offshoot.

Ed Crane, founder and president of the libertarian Cato Institute, said his group would not consider the road Heritage has taken.

"Cato is neither an advocacy nor a 'grassroots' organization," Crane said. "For more than three decades we have developed and debated policy proposals ... in a nonpartisan manner from a classic liberal perspective. We will continue to do so."

McGann, who maintains a world ranking of think tanks, drew a line between advocacy-oriented groups such as Heritage and CAP and those that are more academic.

"I think the other institutions would find it more difficult both philosophically and operationally [to follow Heritage's example]," he said. "That being said, the reality is if you look at it from the inception in the '70s, most of the other institutions thought that Heritage was going to be a flash in the pan."

Three decades later, Heritage is more powerful than ever and expanding.

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