

# New 'free market' think tank sets its sights on 2012 legislative session

By [Ashley Lopez](#) | 11.02.11 | 1:19 pm

Foundation for  
Government  
Accountability CEO  
Tarren Bragdon (Pic via  
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Just months after opening up shop, a Naples-based “free market” public policy group that has so far declined to disclose the source of its funding has already made inroads with state government, and is gearing up to influence Florida’s 2012 legislative session.

The Foundation for Government Accountability was [incorporated](#) as a nonprofit on June 27, 2011. [According to the organization’s website](#), the group’s goal is to “develop and promote free market public policies that achieve limited, constitutional government and a robust economy that will be an engine for job creation across the state.” The IRS [lists](#) the Foundation as a “public charity with a 50 percent deductibility limitation.”

The man behind this new right-leaning public policy advocacy group: Tarren Bragdon.

While unknown to most Floridians, Bragdon made quite a name for himself in Maine, where a [newspaper called](#) Bragdon “arguably the most influential non-elected suit” in the state capital.

At the age of 21, Bragdon became the youngest state representative ever elected to the Maine Legislature, but he moved on to influence policy in other ways after two terms.

As CEO of the Maine Heritage Policy Center, Bragdon ran afoul of Democratic critics for running a policy group that “cloaked itself as a ‘scholarly research center’ while advancing policy embraced by the extreme right and Libertarianism, a movement currently marshaled nationally by factions of the tea party,” [according to another Maine newspaper](#).

Steve Mistler, who [profiled Bragdon](#) for the *Sun Journal*, reported that the group faced “allegations that its increased involvement in this year’s gubernatorial election pushes, if not violates, the political lobbying limits allowed by its tax-exempt status”:

The center’s political activism is made more relevant after a recent report in The New Yorker magazine detailing the tea party’s billionaire benefactor, Koch Industries. The modern-day oil baron has funnelled millions into the nonprofit Americans for Prosperity group.

According to the story, AFP is at the nexus of a national web of like-minded nonprofits set up as analysis centers to produce policy papers challenging climate science and regulation of the financial industry. Billed as education positions, the analysis papers ultimately benefit the organization’s anonymous corporate donors, the story says.

The furor over AFP would seem distant from Maine politics if not for the group’s similarities to the Maine Heritage Policy Center. The connection is more than resemblance: Two months ago AFP started a Maine chapter and began partnering with the policy center to hold activist training

seminars.

Bragdon has repeatedly dismissed claims that the group broke any of the rules that restrict tax-exempt organizations, as well as claims that the group was bankrolled by shadowy monied interests such as the Koch brothers. His work eventually caught the eye of individuals in Florida who want the Sunshine State to have its own version of the Heritage Policy Center.

According to Bragdon, he left his influential position in Maine because he was interested in working in a bigger state.

“This was a good opportunity for me,” he tells The Florida Independent.

Bragdon says there “were initial donors who were interested in having [him] here” in Florida, but will not name who those donors are.

“Every year we will disclose our donors,” he says. “Unless they would prefer us not to disclose their contribution, but we don’t usually have a problem with that.”

While Florida donors might not request anonymity, Maine donors did request it back when Bragdon was with Heritage Policy Center. In March, Bragdon [told](#) a Maine newspaper that his donors chose to remain anonymous because of possible “political retribution (against) individuals who may choose privately to support our work.”

The Foundation for Government  
Accountability logo (Pic via  
[floridafga.org](http://floridafga.org))

While there is little knowledge of who helped open the Foundation’s doors, documents show the group already has a tie to a big name in conservative circles. According to the group’s articles of incorporation, one of the group’s “initial trustees” is Robert Levy of the Cato Institute. Levy is now [officially a member of the Foundation’s board of directors](#).

The Cato Institute was one of the large conservative groups known to contribute to the Heritage Policy Center while Bragdon worked there. [According to SourceWatch](#), “in its 2006 annual report the Cato Institute states that it made a grant of \$50,000 to the Maine Heritage Policy Center.” The Cato Institute was founded in 1977 by Edward H. Crane and Charles Koch of Koch Industries.

Levy is also known as the [attorney behind a U.S. Supreme Court decision](#) that struck down Washington, D.C.’s 32-year-old gun ban in 2008. He is also sits on the boards of the Institute for Justice and the Federalist Society.

The Foundation has also [registered](#) with the State Policy Network. The State Policy Network [has been described](#) by *Mother Jones* as “a little-known umbrella group with deep ties to the national conservative movement.”

“Its mission is simple: to back a constellation of state-level think tanks loosely modeled after Heritage that promote free-market principles and rail against unions, regulation, and tax increases,” *Jones* reports. “By blasting out policy recommendations and shaping lawmakers’ positions through briefings and private meetings, these think tanks cultivate cozy relationships with GOP politicians. And there’s a long tradition of revolving door relationships between SPN staffers and state governments. While they bill themselves as independent think tanks, SPN’s members frequently gather to swap ideas.”

Bragdon says he chose to base the group in Naples because he “has support” in the area and wants to have

the group headquartered where his donor base is. He is looking to open a satellite office in Tallahassee. "We anticipate on testifying on a couple of issues there," he says.

Before moving to Florida, Bragdon had already met the biggest names in the state's conservative circles: Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Gov. Rick Scott. While Bragdon was CEO of the group, the Heritage Policy Center hosted Rubio as a keynote speaker.

Bragdon says he also met with Scott in Tallahassee in August. *The Ave Herald* [reported](#) that when Scott visited Immokalee and Ave Maria a few weeks ago, "he was accompanied by Tarren Bragdon, who moved to Ave Maria from Maine recently to set up a new think tank." Bragdon says he "toured" with Scott in 2009 when Scott was campaigning with the anti-health care reform operation he launched, Conservative for Patients' Rights.

One of the Foundation's policy pamphlets was cited in the state's defense of its new welfare drug testing law, during a challenge brought by the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida. The Foundation report claimed that a decline in the number of applicants approved for welfare benefits was because of the new law.

"Given the significant decline in August 2011 approvals," Bragdon wrote, "it appears to be a very significant trend and quite likely related to the drug testing requirement, as the economy did not change radically from June through August."

A judge [threw out](#) the study last week, claiming it was "not competent expert opinion." The Bush-appointed judge wrote that "even a cursory review of certain assumptions in the pamphlet undermines its conclusions."

Bragdon says his group researched the state's welfare drug testing program independently. He was surprised when the state included his pamphlet in its defense.

Right now, Bragdon says he is working to make sure the group is ready to testify in front of state policy-makers during the upcoming legislative session. "The best way to influence policy is to actually talk to these legislators," he says.

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