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GOP rallied for proposals that could 'complicate life' at think tanks — but right-wing orgs may bear the brunt

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October 14, 2022

In June, John R. Allen resigned from his position as president of the Brookings Institution following allegations that he had secretly lobbied on behalf of the government of Qatar. Journalist Michael Schaffer, in an article published by Politico on October 14, reports that there has been a considerable “uproar” following that controversy — including “a new wave of congressional scrutiny and proposed legislation” that has been “driven largely but not exclusively by conservatives” and “could ultimately complicate life at” think tanks.

But Schaffer stresses that right-wing think tanks could be among the ones that such legislation would affect. Schaffer cites Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa on the right and Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts on the left as two senators who have proposed bills that could affect how think tanks function. Warren’s bill, according to Schaffer, “would require think tanks to disclose donors — not just foreign ones — that pay for lobbying materials, among other things.”

“For all the joy that conservative pols have taken at Brookings’ latest turn in the barrel, conversations with people around the industry reveal an irony: Any potential new wave of government-mandated disclosure rules, especially those that go beyond foreign money, would actually represent a bigger cultural change at right-wing organizations, some of which historically have tended to see donations as a form of free speech,” Schaffer reports. “Establishmentarian center-left outfits like Brookings already share significant pieces of that information — thanks in part, it should be noted, to previous funding imbroglios, and their reliance on corporate dollars. The Heritage Foundation, by contrast, says less than two percent of its income comes from corporate sources.”

Heritage is one of the most famous right-wing think tanks in the United States. Another is the Cato Institute, which has much more of a libertarian outlook than the socially conservative Heritage. Meanwhile, the Claremont Institute is a right-wing think tank that has taken a very MAGA turn in recent years.

“It’s also notable that none of the proposals that have been publicized since the tumult at Brookings would have done much about Allen, whose allegedly fishy work for Qatar was done before he took over Brookings and would theoretically be covered by the Foreign Agent Registration Act,” Schaffer writes. “He’s denied improper behavior and hasn’t been charged with any wrongdoing. What the scrutiny of Allen did do, though, was re-focus attention on the organization’s broader history with the emirate.”

Schaffer points out that different think tanks have different policies when it comes to who they will or won’t accept money from.

“Under the status quo,” Schaffer observes, “there are few rules about who a think tank may accept money from and who it has to tell. And there are probably as many internal policies as there are think tanks: The Heritage Foundation doesn’t take any money from governments of any sort, foreign or domestic. Brookings does take money from governments, but only democratic ones. The Center for American Progress also takes foreign money, but not for any specific project. It also discloses donors, unless those donors choose to remain anonymous, something deep-pocketed types occasionally do to avoid being hit up by others.”