

Mitt Romney and the Marketplace of Ideas

Heath Brown | June 3, 2012

One way to think about a presidential campaign is to break it into two broad categories: political and policy. The people who work on a campaign in particular either come from the world of politics -- working on Capitol Hill, in state government, or in [political communications/lobbying](#) -- or from the world of policy -- working in the academy, for a think tank, or research institute. Advising Governor Romney on [education](#) is a host of seasoned politicians, many having served President George W. Bush: Education Secretary Rod Paige, Nina S. Rees, Christina Culver, John Bailey, Emily Stover DeRocco, Carol D'Amico, Bill Hansen, Scott Fleming, and Tom Luna.

As intriguing is the seven of the remaining education advisers, those who fall on the policy-side of the campaign, who share a common affiliation: the Hoover Institution. Romney Education Co-Chair Martin West, Bill Evers, Paul Peterson, Herbert Walberg, Phillip Handy, Grover Whitehurst (who also was an appointee in the Bush Department of Education), and John E. Chubb (who later resigned from the campaign) all currently serve as fellows, on the Hoover Board, or on the think tank's education journal, *Education Next*. Such a concentration of talent first begs the question of why one single university-affiliated think tank would provide so many policy ideas to a former governor from Massachusetts, home to an ample array of elite institutions of higher learning. And second, does it matter? Recounted by James Smith in his 1991 book, *The Idea Brokers*, Hoover's long history mirrors the complex role of policy ideas in the political process. At its founding, former President Herbert Hoover envisioned a library based at Stanford University with an extensive collection on World War I. Overtime, the library grew and changed, emerging in the 1970s as an intellectual powerhouse filled with conservative scholars, publishing major policy papers, and advising Republican presidents. So influential, Cold War lore recounts, Mikhail Gorbachev repeatedly complained to U.S. leaders that a single Hoover publication, *The United States in the 1980s*, set U.S. foreign policy. And Gorbachev may have been on to something; fifty-five Hoover-affiliated scholars and staffers were appointed to positions in the Reagan administration, including White House advisers Martin Anderson, Edwin Meese, and Milton Friedman.

It would appear that Hoover's influence remains just as potent in 2012 as it was in 1980 (indicative of this sustained power, the campaign's chosen pre-election transition chief, Mike Leavitt, [once established](#) a think tank based on the successful model of Hoover). Romney's education reform platform shares much in common with the ideas circulating around Hoover for the last decade: expanding school choice through vouchers and charter schools, public accountability through standards and testing, and a distrustful view of teacher unions. And Romney has chosen smartly: these seven scholars advising the Governor have authored some of the most significant recent social science research on education reform.

Romney, of course, is not alone in cherry-picking from just a small-group of thinkers. President Obama was guilty of this same approach during his campaign and ultimate presidential transition. He relied upon the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think (or "action") tank, for dozens of advisers, many key White House political appointments (including Cassandra Butts, Melody Barnes, and Michele Jolin), and a host of policy ideas that were incorporated into his agenda.

This trend is troubling for at least three reasons. First, think tanks have typically maintained an ethos of nonpartisanship and scientific rationality, preferring to remain aloof from political battles in favor of a more distant position as neutral arbiter of policy solutions. The increasingly close relationships between think tanks, such as Hoover and the Center for American Progress, and presidential campaigns threatens to weaken this neutral position and leave crucial policy debates devoid of unbiased voices.

Second, it suggests that the faith Romney's policy advisers place in the open market on issues as varied as education, health care, and the environment does not extend to the open marketplace of ideas. In fact, it rejects a key belief of the Hoover Institution itself [which argues on its website](#) that: "a free flow of competing ideas leads to an evolution of policy adoptions and associated consequences affecting the well-being of society." Absent from Romney's proposals on education are most ideas promoted by progressive think tanks, but also some conservative ones such as expanding character education (advocated by the [Josephson Institute](#)), permitting public school prayer (promoted by the [Family Research Council](#)), and abolishing the Department of Education (supported by the [Cato Institute](#)).

Third, and perhaps most problematic, such a tendency in our political system is bad for a representative democracy. It narrows the open discourse on policy, it empowers a small group of unelected and largely unknown individuals, and it reduces the role that the public can play in shaping the presidential agenda. The

future vitality of the U.S. democratic system of government and quality of our public policies should be based on broadening the array of ideas presidential candidates from both parties and the public can evaluate, debate, and ultimately base their political decisions.