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Trump Acolytes Craft Parallel GOP Universe So Trumpism Lives On

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Allies of Donald Trump have built an ecosystem of think tanks, fund-raising outfits and professional development organizations designed to push his populist agenda for years to come whether or not the former president ever seeks office again.

With Trump-like branding, a number of the groups are named after his America First philosophy and serve to challenge the conservative orthodoxy of groups like the Heritage Foundation or the American Enterprise Institute whose ideas have guided generations of Republican politicians.

The aim is to develop the former president's unorthodox policy preferences into a coherent program, ready-made for a new generation of politicians to adopt and carry out. No fewer than six new organizations so far are devoted to carrying on his policy legacy.

"There were fights that weren't being fought," said Russ Vought, Trump's last director of the Office of Management and Budget. He started the Center for Renewing America, a think tank with a Capitol Hill office, and a companion grassroots advocacy organization, Citizens for Renewing America, about a week after leaving office in January. His policy shop has eight paid staffers, including Vought, but he wouldn't release figures on its fundraising or finances.

It's unclear how much reach and influence most of the new groups have yet, as their financial paperwork that would reveal their fundraising prowess isn't due to the Internal Revenue Service for several months.

Stephen Miller, a former White House senior adviser and anti-immigration hardliner, is leading America First Legal, a nonprofit to preserve Trump's policies on immigration and other issues. Jenna Ellis, who represented Trump and his campaign in some of its attempts to overturn last November's election results, is chairwoman of the Election Integrity Alliance, which is focused on state voting laws. The group is part of the American Greatness Fund, a nonprofit set up by Brad Parscale, Trump's former campaign manager.

And there's the America Alliance, run by Michael Glassner, chief operating officer of Trump's campaign, which is a new network of big donors who pledge to give at least \$100,000 a year for candidates who support Trump's agenda, and to his causes.

The biggest of the organizations is the America First Policy Institute, dedicated to advance what would have been Trump's second-term agenda. The think tank has nearly 45 employees and a \$20 million budget for its first year. It's working out of an office building in Arlington, Va., with an eye toward moving to Washington. Its roster includes Pam Bondi, who defended Trump in his first impeachment trial, and former White House adviser Scott Turner.

It recently added Trump's former acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf and former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt.

"There was no one in this lane, in the America First agenda lane," said Brooke Rollins, who served as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council and now leads the policy shop, which she says will complement and collaborate with existing conservative organizations while promoting Trump's agenda. "We are building this organization in a way to make it a 100-year play."

Trump has given his approval to the American First Policy Institute, the America Alliance, America First Legal and the Center for Renewing America. It's unclear whether he has publicly endorsed the other groups.

Traditional conservatives don't share the America First preference for greater government intervention in the economy, in social welfare policy or in a retreat from the world stage. Trump favored protectionist trade policies, opposed most immigration and wanted the U.S. to withdraw from overseas military operations in Syria and Afghanistan.

Conservatives also opposed his proposals to set up a federal paid family leave program, which some groups are considering as a means of helping parents with young children, a longtime liberal goal.

Trump expanded the Republican base by appealing to blue-collar workers who believed the Democratic Party had left it behind, as much with his personal brand as with his positions on trade and immigration. The new groups want to keep the loyalty of those voters by crafting Trump-inspired policies that will carry on with or without Trump.

Trump has teased that he may run again in 2024, but he will turn 78 that year, and after four years out of office and perhaps still off social media, he might decide against it.

Long-simmering divisions in the Republican Party, laid bare by the ouster of Representative Liz Cheney from her House leadership position over her criticism of the former president, made it hard to find Republicans with government experience who were aligned with Trump's policies.

Supporters of his agenda want to foster a new generation of public servants, so another new group, American Moment, will mentor people committed to his political realignment, helping them gain experience in junior and mid-level positions.

“They’re trying now to create the conditions to allow post-Trumpian figures to win elections and to win the presidency,” said Peter Wehner, a Trump critic and senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center who served in the Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush administrations.

It’s unlikely that the new groups will divert money from longstanding organizations like Heritage, the Cato Institute or AEI, according to Dan Eberhart, a Republican donor, because they have healthy donor pipelines.

According to their 2019 tax returns, the most recent available, Heritage raised \$117 million and AEI raised \$46.6 million.

Those groups snagged some top members of Trump’s administration. Former Vice President Mike Pence who might launch his own presidential bid, is a distinguished visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation, and former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai joined AEI as a visiting fellow.

A donor network assembled by one-time party mega-donors Charles Koch and the late David Koch scaled back their commitments as Trump steamrolled to the nomination in 2016. By the 2020 cycle, the network backed both Republican and a few Democratic candidates in line with their free-market and pro-immigration preferences to the tune of \$47.7 million.

As the Republican Party debates its future, Trump remains its most influential member. His endorsement can be key to winning primary races and he has vowed to take out enemies within the party and has the money to do so.

His leadership political action committee, Save America, had \$85 million cash on hand at the end of the first quarter, and he appeared at a fundraiser for a new super PAC, Make America Great Again Action, Inc., on May 22 at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster.

The network of new groups could have staying power long after his political career is over.

Saurabh Sharma, American Moment’s president, credits Trump for creating an ideological shift in the GOP, saying the credibility he earned as a pugnacious candidate allowed him to break with traditional Republican positions.

“It is only the Trump that is led by instinct and this ‘id force’ in politics that could have broken the tired consensus that came before,” Sharma said.