

Corporate interests plot course on the rising 'sea of red' in state capitals

Meeting in private, ALEC activists look to growing Republican dominance in state government to unleash a wave of laws to cut business taxes, restrict unions and expand school privatization.

By Robert Faturechi
ProPublica

Shortly after the November election, with the nation's political attention focused on the Trump transition, an influential advocacy group met outside Washington to discuss how to leverage the extraordinary shift of power to Republicans in the rest of the country.

The American Legislative Exchange Council — a nonprofit better known as ALEC — briefed its members and allied groups on the bright future for its agenda now that Republicans will effectively control 68 of the nation's 99 state legislative bodies, as well as 33 governor's mansions. Among other things, group members said they would push bills to reduce corporate taxes, weaken unions, privatize schooling and influence the ideological debate on college campuses.

"We can pretty much do whatever we want to right now," said Rep. Jim DeCesare, a Republican state legislator in Kentucky, where the party gained the state House for the first time in nearly a century.

DeCesare, who had been minority whip, described plans for "a pretty intense agenda" including a so-called right-to-work law allow-

ing employees who are covered by collective bargaining agreements to opt out of joining labor unions. [It was signed into law Jan. 7.] Another, he said, would be repealing rules that require government contractors to pay employees more than the minimum wage. Neighboring states competing for new businesses, he said, had already gutted such regulations.

"We've got some catching up to do, but we plan to make up a lot of ground in a very short time," DeCesare said. "This is our time to shine."

Another ALEC official, Michael Bowman, told the group that outside advocates, not lawmakers, held the key to success. "Legislators are not the trailblazers of developing policies," Bowman said. "They're actually the retail consumers."

ALEC, founded in 1973, acts as a clearinghouse for business-friendly model bills. Among its major donors are the billionaires Charles and David Koch. Members include corporations and their lobbyists, along with hundreds of legislators who work together to craft "free-market" legislation offered in many states at once. The group has successfully advanced bills imposing voter ID rules and loosening labor and environmental regulations.

Because the group generally al-

lies with Republicans, November's results provide the best chance yet to turn its ideas into law. In Iowa, for example, the party regained dominance in the state Senate, winning a trifecta of both chambers and the governorship for the first time in almost two decades. Republicans expanded their lead in the Pennsylvania Senate to a two-thirds majority, large enough to threaten to override vetoes by Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat. Even in North Carolina, where Democrat Roy Cooper eked out a win for governor, Republicans retained their veto-proof majorities in the legislature,

where lawmakers have pushed through a series of controversial laws, including one that rolled back protections for transgender people using public bathrooms. The number of states where Republicans control both the legislature and the governor's office will rise from 23 to 25. The total number of Republican legislators nationwide also has grown.

The post-election lunch meeting, held Nov. 17 at the organization's Arlington, Virginia, headquarters, included members of ALEC and other conservative groups, with some calling into a private conference line. Ashley Varner, a strategic communications director at ALEC, opened the session by pointing out

that with the power shift in Washington, opportunities at the state level were flying under the radar. "There's a sea of red," Varner said, adding that hundreds of incumbents from both parties had been ousted. "What are we going to do with these new legislatures?"

Inez Feltscher, director of ALEC's education task force, outlined plans to advocate for legislation giving money to parents who take their children out of public schools — stipends they could use for private schooling or other educational expenses. Critics of these "education savings accounts" say they're a drain on public-school funding, while proponents argue they give parents a chance to pick the best situation for their kids.

Feltscher acknowledged another motivation: "To break the monopoly on one of the most important institutions in America." Conservatives have long been at odds with teachers unions over the structure and curriculum of public schools.

Another ALEC target, Feltscher said, would be the state of "free debate on American universities," which conservatives say are largely dominated by left-leaning faculty, courses and speakers. She said lawmakers could use a range of tactics to press administrators to include multiple ideologies during on-campus public policy talks, such as demanding an annual count of campus events that included more than one perspective. Simply requiring measurement and public reporting would apply pressure, she said, but legislators could also take it to "the nuclear level" and threaten to pull funding from schools that are perceived to be limiting discourse.

"There's going to be a lot more aggression on this," Feltscher said.

ALEC executives also forecasted tax cuts and other conservative fiscal reforms in New Hampshire, Missouri, Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

Jonathan Williams, vice president of ALEC's Center for State Fiscal Reform, reminded the group that one of the only Republican majorities lost in November came in

Nevada, where taxes had been raised. Williams acknowledged the presidential campaign was "a little light on policy details" but said he was optimistic the Trump administration would follow the states' lead. "The stars have aligned," Williams said.

Bowman, who is ALEC's vice president of policy, said the change in Washington, D.C., might benefit ALEC's fight to preserve anonymity for donors to politically active nonprofit groups at the state level. With Trump in office, Democrats might now start to see the value of this privacy. "Democrats who are afraid of the Republican administration are beginning to say 'Maybe we need to embrace some First Amendment rights,'" Bowman said.

Contacted for comment, Varner, the ALEC communications director, said the organization's optimism is based not on expanded Republican control, but rather voter discontent with the status quo, regardless of party. DeCesare, the Kentucky lawmaker, responded with an email stating he didn't attend the meeting. Varner, however, confirmed that DeCesare had called into the meeting on the conference line.

Stephen Voss, a University of Kentucky political scientist, said the Republican resurgence will have a major impact on important policies across the country. He expects most of the changes to percolate out of formerly split states where the GOP has now taken total control — like Kentucky — rather than in states with longstanding Republican majorities.

"Those are the states where there's just a lot of pent-up demand, a lot of unhappiness with the status quo," he said. "The people who have been waiting to make those changes can now implement them."

Voss said that shifts in political control after years of stability often produce a period of dramatic policy innovation.

"And what we know about public policy is it spreads," Voss said. "Other states will pick up their innovations, good or bad."

Burns retires

From Page 2

Burns became active in Local 11, serving on its Executive Board, as a shop steward, and on the bargaining committee for the United Labor Union Association, which is comprised of local union office staff.

"Vickie has worked tirelessly to ensure unions know where to go when they have a member in need, whether for food, shelter or just someone to talk with," said Bob Tackett, executive secretary-treasurer of the Northwest

Oregon Labor Council and president of the LCSA board of directors.

In 2010, Burns received the Commitment in Action award from the Oregon Employment and Training Association. The award is presented annually to an individual who makes significant contributions to the field of workforce development.

In 2014, she received the Del Ricks Award for community service at the annual Labor Appreciation and Recognition Night sponsored by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council.



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