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# Think tank's influence grows with Haley in office



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COLUMBIA, S.C. A little-known policy council has garnered immense influence with Gov. Nikki Haley - a fact made clear at a budget briefing a week before Haley took office.

The task force Haley appointed to tackle the state's financial problems is wrestling with ways to reshape the way government spends money. The South Carolina Policy Council and its allies shape what's happening at those meetings.

Haley trumpeted one of the council's top issues - transparency - during her rise to the governor's mansion. And now it's clear the council will have her ear and an important role to play the next four years.

Haley appointed Policy Council president Ashley Landess to the five-member budget panel, but the group's influence is much larger: Joining Landess at the table is Jamie Shuster, the council's former budget researcher and director of external affairs who has just taken a job as Haley's top budget writer. Nearby, a Policy Council staffer takes notes, part of the staff and research support Landess has given the budget task force.

The governor also appointed two Republican state lawmakers to the budget task force. Both are fans of the Policy council's work, and Sen. Tom Davis of Beaufort said it makes sense that Haley would rely on the council.

"They've always historically focused on limited government, examining state spending, transparency and those are the issues that Nikki Haley has sort of brought to the fore through her campaign and through the laying out of her agenda," Davis said. "So I think what you're seeing is an alignment between the things that Governor Haley is pushing for and what the Policy Council has historically championed."

Davis notes the task force has relied on the council's research and briefings to sort out state budget problems.

"The Policy Council was a great resource for Representative Haley and it will remain one for Governor Haley as she tackles some of the tough issues the Policy Council has unique insight and expertise on," Haley spokesman Rob Godfrey said.

Haley's campaign was fueled in no small measure by joining the group's call for more roll call votes

in the Legislature. Long considered an insider issue, roll call voting captured outsized attention as tea parties grew in strength along with their mistrust of elected officials.

In 2008, the council reported how rarely roll call votes were taken. Not long afterward, Haley, then a state representative, blistered House leadership for a voice vote OK'd pension increases for legislators. Landess and Haley flew around the state to argue for more roll call votes.

And Landess sees Haley and the group scoring from that work.

"Two years ago, people said this transparency thing was a flash in the pan," Landess said. "It's not. People do want to understand how their government operates."

Landess notes a long friendship with Haley dating to the new governor winning her first House race in 2004 and soon after winning one of her group's awards. "She was definitely someone to watch for leadership," Landess said.

Legislators don't like that they are more frequently the target of critical report from the council, including research showing taxpayer are giving more cash to legislators and their staffs even as the state faces an \$829 million budget shortfall.

"They used to be the group that published papers on issues the Legislature cared about," said Senate President Pro Tem Glenn McConnell, a Charleston Republican.

"But I don't pay them much attention anymore. They've changed. They no longer, to me, are reliable," McConnell said. "They've become more political than policy oriented."

McConnell said he's not concerned about Haley's Policy Council ties. "She's got to pick the people she trusts and if that's who she trusts, so be it," McConnell said.

Those connections have brought clout the Policy Council has seldom seen in the 24 years since it was set up by a Reagan Administration insider. Tom Roe created the State Policy Network, which now has think tanks in every state.

Some are more influential than others and have varying links to their governors and legislators:

- In Texas, Republican Gov. Rick Perry speaks to the Texas Public Policy Foundation every two years and he's donating the cash raised by his most recent book to the group.
- North Carolina has two network groups. The John Locke Foundation has lobbyists and its own newspaper, and the Civitas Institute emphasizes policy issues at the Legislature. It has a political arm that sent mailers into some Democratic incumbent districts last fall.
- In Florida, the James Madison Institute's board is full of executives from the state's largest business and is chaired by the Sunshine State's former House speaker.
- The Maine Heritage Policy Center been influential in reporting state budget waste and is close to newly elected GOP Gov. Paul LePage. The center's chief executive took a leave to co-chair LePage's transition and another staffer who wrote reports critical of state spending is now LePage senior adviser.

Some of those groups disclose more about who is putting cash into their coffers. Landess said donors give about \$1.5 million and that membership has quadrupled in the past couple of years.

But without publicly releasing donor details, it's natural to question the group's research work.

"I don't know who the Policy Council represents," said House Minority Leader Harry Ott, a St. Matthews Democrat. "But they certainly have accumulated a lot of power within the governor's office and that should make the public want to know where does their money come from; what's driving that train?"

Landess said its donors don't buy council opinions on issues.

"Nobody buys anything out of the Policy Council," Landess said. "We've taken on issues that have offended pretty much everyone across the board. It's pretty hard to argue that we're benefiting anyone specifically."

**Associated Press writers April Castro in Austin, Texas; Gary Robertson in Raleigh, N.C.; Glenn Adams in Augusta, Maine; and Bill Kaczor in Tallahassee, Fla., contributed to this report.**