

Was Heritage's Shift in Policy Based on Intellectual Arguments or Were They Following Trump's Lead?

The real-world transformation of The Heritage Foundation under President Kevin Roberts shows that **the shift was heavily driven by political survival and the desire to stay aligned with Donald Trump, rather than a gradual build-up of new academic research.**

While Heritage leadership has built out a post-hoc populist narrative to defend their new stances, the timeline, internal crackdowns, and a massive exodus of their own scholars prove that following Trump's lead was the primary catalyst.

The Evidence: Why it Was a Top-Down Political Pivot

1. *Abrupt Policy Reversals Based on "Trumpism"* If a think tank changes its mind based on evidence, the shift is typically slow, debated, and transparent. Instead, Heritage reversed decades of foundational beliefs almost overnight to mirror Trump's specific policy whims:

The Ukraine Flip: When the war in Ukraine began, Heritage initially flew a Ukrainian flag outside its building. However, as the populist wing of the GOP turned against the war, Heritage leadership explicitly ordered policy analysts to watch Tucker Carlson monologues, delete past tweets supporting Ukraine, and rewrite their research to argue against funding the war.

The Tariff Flip: For 50 years, Heritage was arguably Washington's fiercest defender, of free trade. When Trump aggressively pursued protectionist tariffs, Heritage leadership completely purged its traditional free-market orthodoxy to champion tariffs as "tools of statecraft," actively attacking critics as "globalist elites".

2. The Purge and Exodus of Actual Subject Experts

When an institution values data over a political mandate, it leans on its senior experts. Heritage did the exact opposite. Former staffers have detailed a highly pressurized internal climate where anyone who pointed out the economic flaws in Trump's policies was sidelined or deemed persona non grata. This triggered a historic structural collapse:

The heads of Heritage's legal, economic, and data analysis teams resigned almost entirely. Three members of the board of trustees and long-time conservative leaders cut ties. These departing experts moved en

masse to former Vice President Mike Pence's think tank, Advancing American Freedom, explicitly citing Heritage's sudden abandonment of data-driven, free-market principles to curry administration favor.

3. Institutionalizing "The Gut Instinct"

Kevin Roberts himself essentially admitted that the goal was political alignment rather than independent, evidence-based inquiry. Roberts publicly stated that his purpose in overseeing initiatives like Project 2025 was to "institutionalize Trumpism" and structure the think tank around "the gut instincts of a great, heroic populist like Donald Trump".

1 How Heritage Mathematically and Ideologically "Spins" the Shift

To maintain a veneer of intellectual credibility, Heritage does not say they are just copying Trump. Instead, they reframe the data through a populist lens:

Changing the Metric of Success: Historically, Heritage measured economic health via GDP growth and consumer prices (both of which suffer under tariffs). Now, they argue that decades of free trade caused "stagnating middle-class wages" and the "decay of communities". They shifted the goalpost from macroeconomics to cultural populism to make the data fit the conclusion.

The China Exception: They argue that standard free-market rules cannot apply to a world where state-subsidized adversaries like China dominate manufacturing, framing tariffs as defensive national security measures rather than government intervention.

2 The Bottom Line

Heritage functioned exactly like the "transactional defense attorney" model. The data did not magically change between 2015 and 2024 to prove that free trade and global alliances were suddenly bad. What changed was the leader of the Republican Party. Heritage chose to sacrifice its reputation for independent intellectual rigor to guarantee that its phone would keep ringing in the Trump White House.