

The election operators - Donald Trump

United States: The force behind Project 2025: Kevin Roberts has the roadmap for a second Trump term

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The ‘cowboy Catholic’ head of the Heritage Foundation is on a mission to align the right behind Trumpism, and has a plan in place to overturn the American government as it exists if Trump returns to power

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An image of Kevin Roberts against the backdrop of a painting. Illustration: Eddie Guy/The Guardian

Elites with a “sense of superiority” are ruining Washington, despite being “*mere equals* of the workers who shower *after* work instead of before”, writes Kevin Roberts in the introduction to Project 2025, the conservative manifesto for a second Trump administration.

Roberts is a historian and the PhD-holding president of the Heritage Foundation, a premier Washington conservative thinktank that drafted the plans to dismantle and reorganize US government.

It’s the type of job where one would shower before work.

Roberts is working to align the right behind Trumpism and provide a nationalist manifesto, along with a database of vetted political appointees, for an incoming conservative administration. With Project 2025, the foundation wants to position itself as a policy and personnel force in the potential next Trump term, similar to how the thinktank proved critical to Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Whether it can have the pull it desires this time relies heavily on the whims of Trump himself.

“We need to understand what time it is in America. And right now, Donald Trump, whether someone likes it or not – I happen to like it – is the standard bearer for conservatives,” Roberts [said recently](#) on MSNBC. He has [said](#) the project is “institutionalizing Trumpism” and sets the course for the conservative movement’s policy aims for many years to come.

For Roberts, a former educator and culture warrior who has quickly ascended in conservative politics, his role at the helm of the foundation and its political advocacy arm makes him a face of a changing movement that’s replete with infighting and attempting to align behind a set of policy goals that would significantly remake the US government – and the lives of many Americans.

Though Project 2025 counts more than 100 other conservative organizations as supporters and contributors, there are a few conservative heavyweights missing from its list – and a host of conservatives who aren't on board with the nationalist twist the foundation is taking.

Roberts said on the first episode of his podcast that features members of Congress and prominent conservative faces, he's really "just a dad". "I'm a guy worried about the future of America but also optimistic about the future of America." And at Heritage, he added, "we're going on offense".

Heritage and Roberts did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

'Next thing you know, he's head of the Heritage Foundation'

Roberts grew up poor in Lafayette, Louisiana, according to a [profile of him earlier this year](#) in Wyoming publication WyoFile. His parents divorced and he watched the boom-and-bust cycle of the oil economy implode in his community.

He studied history, culminating in a PhD in American history from the University of Texas at Austin. His [2003 dissertation](#) focused on the lives of enslaved people in Louisiana, showing how "enslaved peoples of African descent were not only affected by, but influenced, the major societal and economic changes in Louisiana's evolution into a slave society".

He taught history at the college level before founding a Catholic K-12 school, the John Paul the Great Academy, in his hometown, which he led until a move to Wyoming.

In Wyoming, he was the president of Wyoming Catholic College in the rural city of Lander. He snagged a [New York Times headline in 2015](#) after rejecting any federal student aid funding because it would compromise the college's stances against LGBTQ+ people and covering birth control with health insurance. The paper wrote that "an insurrection is brewing here at Wyoming Catholic College, a tiny redoubt of cowboy-style Catholicism", and the "cowboy Catholic" moniker stuck.

"He made a name for himself and for the school," said Rone Tempest, a journalist who profiled Roberts in WyoFile and was Roberts' neighbor when he lived in the state. "He showed a talent for getting attention for this tiny school."

Glenn Arbery, who served as the college's president after Roberts left, called Roberts a "charming and open and authentic man, very intelligent, very interested in other people that he's working with". Roberts' future was "always clearly political".

"I expected him to be the next senator from Texas or governor or something like that," Arbery said, "because his capacities were large, and his whole genius was political in the sense that he was always thinking of ways to bring about the ends that he was after, which were conservative."

He was hired in 2016 by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a major state thinktank aligned with conservatives in the state. He rose to lead the organization after Brooke Rollins, its former president, left to join the Trump administration. Rollins now leads the America First Policy Institute, a Trump-aligned thinktank that could compete with the foundation to be influential in a second Trump term.

Brooke Rollins, the former president of Texas Public Policy Foundation. Photograph: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

During his time at the Texas foundation, he solidified himself as a "Texas firebrand more determined

to fight pandemic restrictions, critical race theory in schools and ‘teaching transgenderism to kindergartners,’” the [Washington Post reported](#) in 2022.

Despite his academic coursework on slavery, he vehemently rejects any diversity, equity and inclusion programs and teachings. And while in Texas, the Republican governor Greg Abbott [named](#) him to the “Texas 1836 Project advisory committee,” a committee set up to promote “patriotic education” and Texas’ founding.

Heritage Foundation named Roberts president in 2021, a rapid ascent in conservative politics. The foundation [praised](#) his work in the states, saying his experience in policy outside DC would be vital “at a time when so many bad ideas are coming out of Washington”.

“We were thinking, there’s Kevin, he’s playing basketball at the Mormon church, and the next thing you know, he’s head of the Heritage Foundation,” Tempest said.

‘You can’t criticize elites when you are the elite’

Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973, but perhaps its most influential moment came during Reagan’s first term with its first “Mandate for Leadership,” the blueprint the foundation is now trying to replicate with Project 2025. The foundation [claims](#) that Reagan gave copies of the manifesto to “every member of his Cabinet” and that nearly two-thirds of the policy recommendations it laid out were either “adopted or attempted”.

As the foundation’s leader, Roberts catapulted into the conservative elite in spite of his hatred of elites.

He now regularly writes op-eds advocating for conservative views in publications both mainstream, like The Hill, and far-right, like the Epoch Times. He invites rightwing influencers and politicians onto his podcast, the Kevin Roberts Show, to talk about foreign policy, education, immigration. He’s gone on Steve Bannon’s show – Bannon has [called](#) Project 2025 a “very well-thought-through program”. He will [appear](#) on a tour spot with Tucker Carlson.

WyoFile notes that he drives a diesel Ford F-150 complete with the yellow-snaked “Don’t Tread on Me” license plate and a “Come and Take It” bumper sticker, both nods to a defiant view of government. He also has a soon-to-be-released [book](#), with a foreword by Trump-favorite senator JD Vance, about “burning down Washington to save America”.

Roberts told [WyoFile](#) he knows Trump personally and that they’ve “spoken several times”, though he didn’t want to overplay their closeness. “I know him and have been with him personally a few times. I know him to be genuine and warm and a good friend,” Roberts said.

Roberts aligns, at least in part, with Trump’s main test of loyalty – Roberts [says](#) he can’t say definitively whether Joe Biden actually won, citing “a lot of unknowns” in counties in Arizona, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

In the process of moving the foundation to be more aligned with Trump, it has lost employees who “worry that the institution is attaching itself to a faction of the conservative movement that prioritizes partisanship over policy”, the Dispatch [reported](#) in 2022. The biggest clashes came over foreign policy, particularly Ukraine aid, which Heritage opposed.

Roberts’ [praise](#) for strongman leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who he [said](#) “should be

celebrated” for moving Hungary on a conservative Christian path, has also come with push back. And his remarks at the National Conservatism conference in London, where he railed against “globalists” as responsible for the world’s ills, were called out as an antisemitic trope by [the Guardian](#).

Some on the right believe the foundation is moving away from its roots as a thinktank promoting free enterprise and small government principles. Avik Roy, a conservative commentator and [critic](#) of the foundation’s current direction, said Roberts’ project is ideological. And while the foundation’s move has been characterized as populist, some of its views, like opposing gay marriage, are not actually popular, Roy has [noted](#).

The nationalist turn, though, is an authentic view for Roberts, Roy said, something “Kevin believes in very firmly”. It does ring inauthentic, however, for the foundation to criticize elites when Heritage is “part and parcel of the elites”, Roy said.

“You can’t criticize elites when you are the elite,” he said. “You’re the ones who are having disproportionate influence in the conversation.”

While the foundation is trying to amplify its already-large influence on conservative politics, the outstanding question - which will likely decide the fates of both Roberts and Heritage in the Trump era - is whether the big swing will work.

Left-leaning groups that have sounded the alarm on the project believe it has the potential to influence policy greatly.

“They’re proudly proclaiming, here’s what we’ll do, here’s how we’re going to do it, said Tony Carrk, the executive director of watchdog group Accountable.US. “And I think when people tell you who they are, we should believe them.”

The Trump campaign has [pushed back on](#) claims that he would follow the policy ideas set out in Project 2025 , saying he has his own ideas and agenda should he win back the White House. If Trump is known for anything, it’s for following his whims, gripes and personal grievances.

“It’s not at all clear to me that the bet that Kevin is making is going to pay off,” Roy said.

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P.S.

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