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Think Tanks in the United States

Activities, Agendas, and Influence

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While it might not be widely recognized, think tanks in the United States fill important public roles and exercise significant influence in the policymaking process. They identify issues and recommend policies, provide the government with expertise and personnel, and educate the public. Their success in America is due in part to the particular nature of the US government and American political culture. This report will examine the basic activities of US think tanks with a focus on the connections between these institutions and the American policymaking process. The following discussion will be conducted with an international audience in mind. This means that where think tank activities are directly related to characteristics of American institutions or culture, some effort will be made to offer a brief explanation of these features. As such, this is an examination of American think tanks in particular, and more specifically, those whose primary purpose is to directly and openly attempt to shape public policy in the United States. It is not a comprehensive discussion of global think tanks, or an exhaustive study of all the diverse American institutions that have adopted the label.

American Think Tanks: An Overview and Brief History

The institution of the "think tank," a policy research organization unaffiliated with a traditional university department, was born in the United States in the first few decades of the 20th Century. While such institutions have proliferated around the world in the subsequent decades, America's approximately 1,830 think tanks comprise a significant share of the world's estimated 6,618 policy research organizations.[1] Total revenues of American think tanks amount to approximately $1 billion per year.[2]

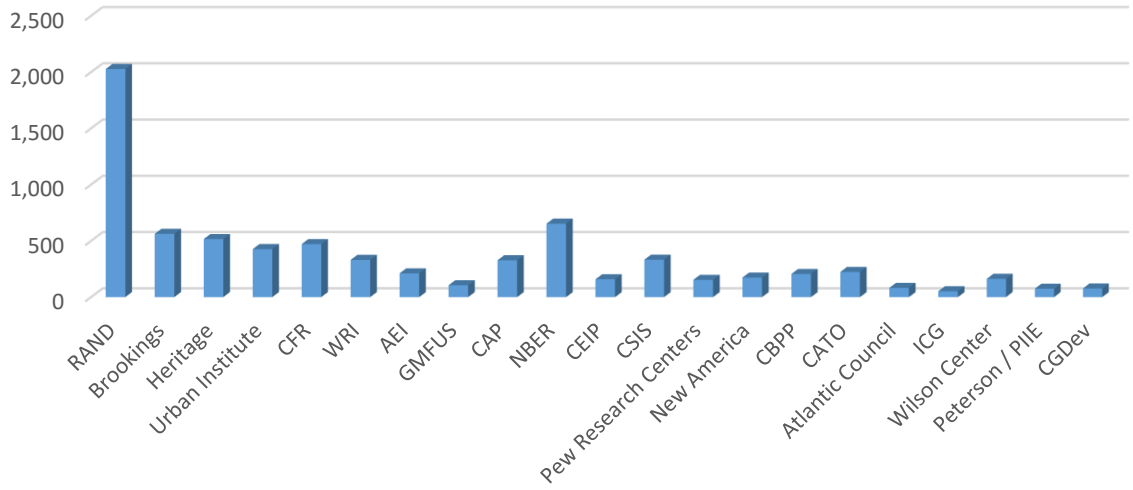
Think tanks typically aim to influence policymaking in one way or another. While it is difficult to measure, many observers agree that think tanks in the United States are particularly successful in this endeavor. US policy research institutions exercise more influence in Washington than institutions of higher education do, and for a variety of reasons they arguably exercise more influence than similar organizations in other countries. In the words of one scholar, American lawmakers have developed an "extraordinary dependence" on think tanks.[3]

While many of the original American think tanks—Brookings, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Council on Foreign Relations—were envisioned as "universities without students" and still largely adhere to this model, the scope, operations, and size of US institutions have diversified significantly over the past few decades. Think tank activities, particularly among newer organizations, have evolved from the old model of scholar-directed research. Organizations such as the RAND Corporation engage largely in commissioned research projects (mostly for the US Government) while organizations like the Heritage Foundation or the Center for American Progress organize their research programs to support ideological or partisan agendas. Such organizations increasingly blur the lines between scholarship and advocacy; research and journalism, and are often affiliated with less scholarly advocacy operations.

There is a considerable range in the size of American think tanks, even among the twenty-one organizations with the greatest revenues. RAND Corporation's $290 million in revenues and 2000 employees dwarfs even second place Brookings. Countless institutions are comprised of a dozen or fewer employees and have budgets of less than $1 million.

Many American think tanks, such as Brookings or the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) aspire to address a full scope of policy issues, from economics and domestic politics to foreign policy. In contrast, in recent decades there has been a proliferation of smaller think tanks that specialize in narrower policy domains or even take on single issues—take for example, the Center for Climate Security. However, even among the largest and highest-profile organizations, there is a certain amount of specialization. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) are exclusively dedicated to foreign relations, and the Urban Institute is heavily focused on domestic fiscal, housing, and health policy and has no foreign affairs research agenda.

Figure 1. 2013 Employees, Top 21 U.S. Organizations by Revenue



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American think tanks play many roles in disseminating information to policymakers, shaping the contours of public discourse, and even in the functioning of the US government. Think tank scholars are routinely called upon by news organizations and congressional committees to provide expertise. For a variety of reasons, think tank experts are often better equipped to discuss policy issues than scholars at traditional universities in the United States. The publishing demands placed on university professors in the US, along with the prevalence (at least in political science) of interpretive frameworks that are alleged to be of little use to policymakers, has led to an increasing separation between the Washington policy world and university research.

The uniqueness of the American form of democracy also allows think tanks to play a greater role in facilitating government functions than they do in other nations. The United States has a much weaker civil service than many democracies, especially those with parliamentary systems. Consequently, there is a smaller permanent base of policy expertise within the government sector. High level officials are politically appointed in the US—they are usually recruited from outside government and typically lose their positions when presidential administrations turn over and thus must return to non-governmental positions. Finally, the election process for the President of the US requires candidates to rely heavily on expert advisors who require comprehensive plans in the event of a victory. All of these factors combine to make US think tanks a sort of "government in waiting" much more than in other countries.

The first wave of American think tanks came in the early decades of the 20th Century with the inauguration of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Brookings Institution (1916), the Hoover Institution (1919), and the Council on Foreign Relations (1921). These organizations tended to consider themselves "universities without students." Brookings (originally the Institute for Government Research) actually granted graduate degrees for some time. These "universities without students" aimed to create the conditions for independent,

objective scholarship on policy options. While their scholars did offer some consultation to policymakers, they tried to maintain a separation from the political process and avoid influencing policy too directly. An example of this form of detached contribution to policy debates can be seen in Brookings' study of the causes of the Great Depression. While the study was critical to Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" policies, not all of the authors of the report supported Roosevelt's solutions.[5]

The American Enterprise Association (later the American Enterprise Institute or AEI) was founded in 1938 to address the perception that the existing policy institutions had too great a bias toward left-leaning or progressive policies. From the beginning, AEI sought to promote polices supportive of free enterprise or laissez-faire economics. Yet even with this more explicitly ideological mandate, it maintained the same distance from the functioning of government as its peers.[6]

After the Second World War, these organizations played important roles in generating ideas for a government that was undertaking significant transitions in foreign policy. The Brookings Institution contributed to the strategy of the Marshall Plan, and the United States' containment strategy during the Cold War was shaped to a large degree at the Council on Foreign Relations.[7] The US Army Air Force, realizing the importance of dedicated policy analysis to strategic issues, established Project RAND in 1945 in coordination with the Douglas Aircraft Company ("RAND" stands for "research and development"). By 1948 RAND had been separated from Douglas and established as an independent nonprofit corporation with a mandate to research technology and policy options far beyond Air Force applications. Today RAND continues to provide a range of on-demand research in many areas of national security and domestic policy, most of which is contracted by the US government.

Many studies of American think tanks mention the arrival of the Heritage Foundation as a critical turning point in the policy research establishment. The story of how this organization was formed explains the new direction that Heritage sought to pursue. In 1971, Congress voted on funding for a controversial defense spending bill that AEI had been studying. AEI's report, however, was intentionally released after the vote in order to avoid any appearance of attempting to influence Congress. Paul Weyrich, then a Senate staffer, asked AEI's president why the study had not been released in time to influence the vote, and received the reply that AEI did not want to intervene and "affect the outcome of the vote." In Weyrich's view, think tank studies of this kind ought to influence such votes, and AEI's avoidance of influencing legislation was self-defeating.[8] In 1973 he helped found the Heritage Foundation, the first US think tank to explicitly work to achieve specific political outcomes on Capitol Hill. The Foundation's stated mission is to "formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense."[9]

By making this commitment, Heritage inaugurated two trends that continue to this day: one is that think tanks since the 1970s have increasingly expanded their activities to include advocating policies and broader political agendas; the second is the preponderance of conservative (right of center) influence in explicitly partisan or ideological organizations. While

some liberal/progressive (left of center) organizations have emulated Heritage's "think *and do* tank" model—most notably the Center for American Progress—according to one study, conservative organizations outspend liberal think tanks by a ratio of three to one and outnumber them two to one.[10]

Since 1980, the number of US think tanks has doubled, with many of the new organizations engaging in a range of advocacy activities as well as primary research.[11] As think tanks become more involved in advocating policies and developing communications and public relations strategies in support of this mission, there has been an increasing tendency for policy expertise to become politicized. Many think tanks as a result are viewed as having their independence compromised by partisan or ideological agendas. Many analysts express concern that as the independence of think tanks from political agendas erodes, so does the objectivity and credibility of their research. In the words of one expert, the institution of the think tank risks being "devalued" the more it becomes entangled in the politics of Capitol Hill.[12] Partisan organizations that focus on selling policies to the public instead of creating policies are less likely to provide workable solutions. In short, recent trends indicate that think tanks will have increasing difficulty separating themselves from the broader American trends of partisanship, political polarization, and the erosion of public confidence in objective, authoritative, or independent (of partisan viewpoints) sources of information.

Think tanks aim to enrich policy discussions in the public sphere and provide policymakers with well-researched policy proposals or creative new policy ideas. In short, they seek to influence policy and they pursue various strategies toward this end. When asked about the impact and importance of their institutions, American think tank leaders typically point first to instances where their proposals were adopted by Congress or the executive branch, or where their ideas significantly altered congressional or expert discussion. Beyond this, think tanks have increasingly sought to influence public opinion or enrich public understanding of issues more generally, and have engaged in a variety of activities in pursuit of this objective. Think tanks can take different approaches to their work—they might simply house and provide support for self-directed scholars, they may direct scholars towards particular research programs that are dictated by the organization's leadership or donors, or they may engage in individual commissioned research projects for particular clients. From a broader perspective, US think tanks also play a discernible role in American public life and in the functioning of the United States government. The following sections will detail these aspects of their operations and agendas before examining the question of their influence in the public sphere.

- There are approximately 1830 think tanks in the United States
- 60% of the world's think tanks are either in North America or Europe
- More than 90% of think tanks worldwide were created after 1951
- The number of US think tanks has more than doubled since 1980
- Most US think tanks created since 1980 are specialized in some way
- Approximately one quarter of US think tanks are in Washington

Source, McGann (2015) p. 10.

What Do Think Tanks Do?

Given that the original vision of the US think tank was that of a "university without students," it is not surprising that the traditional work-product of these organizations consists of books and reports that are comparable to the peer-reviewed work of their university counterparts. The focus on major policy reports or issue studies is still strong at most institutions and many think tank scholars publish books as well. These publications are often produced with a view to providing a template for policy initiatives in Congress or providing guidance for US presidents. Think tanks strive to provide well-timed answers to known policy issues. For example, many policy papers are timed to influence the drafting of major strategy documents or budgets, and think tank scholars and their leadership work to distribute these within appropriate government circles. Policy research also seeks to highlight issues that might have gone unnoticed by government officials. Think tanks employ various forms of peer review in their publication process, although this has become complicated by the proliferation of publication types offered by the Internet—the dividing lines between policy papers, op-eds, articles, and blogs are not always clear. Some think tanks like AEI and Brookings have in-house book publishing for works by their scholars. Brookings, the Cato Institute, AEI and others publish traditional academic journals featuring the work of unaffiliated scholars as well. According to some accounts, sometimes think tank policy work can be remarkably influential. When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, the Heritage Foundation drafted a comprehensive plan for his presidency that contained more than 2000 policy initiatives. The work, entitled, *Mandate for Leadership* was referred to as the "bible" of the Reagan administration. By the time he left the White House, Reagan had implemented 60% of these proposals.[13]

The US government relies on think tank experts to provide outside expertise in various consultative roles. Congressional committees routinely invite scholars to provide testimony on various issues in order to inform lawmakers. While think tank experts are not necessarily more qualified than university professors, they are widely believed to be so, at least on Capitol Hill.[14] Moreover, Washington think tanks are well positioned to provide such expertise and are adept in presenting information in ways that are attractive to government officials. Think tank scholars also provide direct consultation to Congress and executive branch officials, and have been known to write major policy speeches for them.[15] Some think tanks have government relations offices that facilitate exchanges between their scholars and government officials. Think tank scholars also advise presidential transition teams and staff government sponsored "blue-ribbon" panels such as the 9/11 Commission. Many organizations take the amount of testimony or the number of consultations they provide as a measure of success.

Think tanks are also important resources for journalists. Many organizations promote the availability of their experts to provide commentary for the news media—for example, by listing the issues they are willing to discuss. The US has several 24-hour television news channels that have a huge appetite for on-screen commentators and analysts, and think tank scholars often appear as such "talking heads." Many observers of the think tank world note that appearances on television or citations in newspapers have become a dominant metric by which to assess the

influence and importance of a research institution. Some think tanks are clearly more popular than others among the news media, and different news outlets prefer different organizations. Some commentators express concern that the closer relationship with think tanks and the cable news industry in particular generates a dynamic in which scholars face pressures to transform their research into the "sound bites" that dominate the medium.[16] Even worse, too much of a focus on mass media exposure may influence think tanks to direct their research toward more attention-grabbing topics.

Policy research organizations engage in a variety of strategies to directly educate or influence the American public—either the public at large or particular groups like investors, business leaders and other elites. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has long published the journal *Foreign Affairs*, which is more policy-relevant and accessible to generally educated readers than most political science journals. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published *Foreign Policy* for many years, though the magazine now belongs to the *Washington Post.* CFR delivers attractive multimedia issue briefs and "backgrounders" that provide expert analysis and context for issues that are appearing in the news. Many of these products are produced in ways that are useful to university or high school teachers of public policy or international politics. Many think tanks produce podcasts of lectures or conference discussions. Increasingly, they stage interviews and discussions to be produced specifically as podcasts, such as the *Brookings Cafeteria* podcast or the *CogitAsia* podcast from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Most organizations have fairly aggressive email campaigns or other media strategies for keeping the public up to date with the institution's view on current events and highlighting publications or key issues.

Most think tanks host free events that provide their experts' insights to the general public (most in attendance tend to be Washington journalists, government personnel, and businessmen). Not all events programs are created equal: CSIS, for example, hosts more than 2000 events per year. It centers its public profile upon these press briefings, forums, speeches, and panel discussions. Many of these events are ends in themselves rather than efforts to publicize other work. Most other think tanks, on the other hand, tend to use events mainly to highlight the publication of a new report or to launch a new initiative. CFR hosts conference calls with business leaders that allow direct access to their experts' views on international business environments. Most think tanks host large academic conferences that convene think tank scholars, traditional academics and government officials. Many of these conferences are expensive, high-profile events with named corporate sponsors.

Think tanks provide a forum where leaders from business, government, finance, and academia can cross paths—as CFR President Richard Haass describes it, think tanks work as "conveners."[17] In addition, they provide an important nongovernmental space for international dialogue and discussion between scholars and retired government or military officials from different countries. This "track 2" diplomacy might supplement ongoing discussions between nations, but it can also act as a surrogate to official diplomacy on issues too sensitive for government officials to deal in. US think tanks have been forums for dialogues addressing important conflicts around the world. Carnegie hosted a series of dialogues between South

African factions, and CSIS has run programs seeking to bridge divides between antagonistic groups in the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia, and has hosted a Greece-Turkey dialogue. Other such activities include tabletop exercises and crisis simulations that help to educate scholars from different countries about their counterparts' ways of thinking and patterns of behavior.

Think Tank Activities[18]

Public Influence	Private Influence
Holding public forums, seminars, and conferences to discuss various domestic and foreign policy issues	Accepting cabinet, sub-cabinet, or bureaucratic positions in administrations
Encouraging scholars to give public lectures and addresses	Serving on policy task forces and transition teams during presidential elections and on presidential advisory boards
Testifying before committee and subcommittees of Congress or Parliament	Maintaining liaison offices with the House of Representatives and the Senate
Publishing books, opinion magazines, newsletters, policy briefs, and journals that have wide distribution	Inviting selected policy-makers to participate in closed conferences, seminars, and workshops
Producing audio or video for the public which summarize policy issues	Allowing bureaucrats to work at think tanks on a visiting basis
Creating Web pages which, among other things, allow visitors to download institute publications	Offering former policy-makers positions at think tanks
Targeting the public during annual fundraising campaigns	Preparing studies and policy briefs for policy-makers
Attracting media exposure	

There is a significant category of research organizations that specialize in advocating certain issues or promoting particular political ideologies. While some of these organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, focus their advocacy on issues that are not specifically partisan or ideological in the American context, a great number of advocacy think tanks work to promote partisan or ideological perspectives. These organizations (with the exception of the Progressive Policy Institute) do not maintain an official affiliation with US political parties, yet they often

function as public relations operations for the parties, or for factions of the parties.[19] The most visible of these are Heritage and the Center for American Progress.

According to one study, the progressive/liberal CAP spends as much as 40% of its budget on communications and outreach, suggesting a primary focus on disseminating or "marketing" ideas rather than creating them.[20] In addition to developing policy proposals, CAP describes its mission in these terms: "by employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate."[21] Toward this end, CAP or its affiliate organization, the Center for American Progress Action Fund (CAPAF) run prolific blogging programs and CAPAF even runs a news gathering operation that sends reporters in to the field. Given the centrality of these kinds of operations, CAP and its affiliate maintains a relatively large staff of junior associates and full-time bloggers or journalists as compared to PhD scholars.

The Heritage Foundation was explicitly founded to supply national discourse with more conservative ideas, and also works to cultivate young partisan talent. One of Heritage's research products has been what some call "instant analysis" which provides background information and suggest possible responses to current events. Heritage can circulate analysis of a news event on Capitol Hill within 24 hours of its occurrence.[22] In addition to more traditional think tank research, Heritage focuses on messaging and outreach. Heritage has launched a number of websites, including the conservative commentary site *TownHall.com* (now a freestanding enterprise). In support of its messaging mission, Heritage has launched the American Perceptions Initiative, which conducts market research on Americans' views of various policies, in order to "to provide support for strategy and messaging."[23] In order to counteract a perceived "liberal" bias in government or university research on environmental and economic issues, Heritage has also launched a data analysis initiative that seeks to provide alternative analysis of issues like climate change.[24] Like CAP, Heritage has founded a sister advocacy and lobbying organization, Heritage Action for America, that allows it to engage more directly in electoral politics and lobbying. Heritage also runs an ongoing project that rates members of Congress on how "conservative" they are along a 100-point scale. This effort effectively helps to pressure moderate Republican members to move closer to Heritage's vision of conservatism.

Many think tanks try to develop niche programs such as datasets in order to fill gaps in existing academic research or government databases. CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) has gone so far as to collect intelligence to monitor ongoing events. AMTI has obtained and analyzed satellite photographs of the South China Sea and worked to raise the salience of the maritime disputes there in the US media and in government. A similar project was initiated by the Center for American Progress. The Enough Initiative (now independent of CAP) uses satellite surveillance to publicize war crimes and humanitarian crises in Africa.

Think Tanks and Tax Status
A note on the 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 Tax Categories

In order to understand the activities of US non-governmental organizations, it is helpful to take a look at the US tax code. The tax status of a non-governmental organization helps to define its character. This is because this status defines legal parameters and creates public expectations regarding the activities an organization can legitimately engage in. These parameters are delimited by Congress and regulated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Most think tanks in the United States are registered as non-profit organizations under section 501(c)3 of the US tax code. This status confers significant benefits but also comes with many limits regarding political activities. Some organizations have decided to move parts of their operations out of this tax status in order to more directly engage in lobbying and advocacy activities.

501(c)3 is the most common status for non-profit organizations in the United States. These organizations, in addition to being not-for-profit, must be charitable, religious, educational, seeking to prevent cruelty to animals or children or provide similar public goods. Among the innumerable examples of such organizations are colleges and universities, environmental groups, clubs, public health services, community sports programs and more. These organizations do not pay federal taxes, and more significantly, contributions to them are tax-deductible *for the donors*. This means that the US government indirectly subsidizes these non-profit organizations by reducing the tax burden of donors.

A second important feature of the 501(c)3 status is that donations to organizations with this classification are not required to disclose their donors. Most think tanks typically disclose donors, both in annual reports and, if applicable, within the publications that they have funded. However, there are many exceptions, and disclosures often lack detail. Some organizations controversially use the 501(c)3 status to disguise various agendas, effectively dressing up lobbying organizations as think tanks.

Along with these benefits come certain restrictions. Most significantly, 501(c)3 organizations are prohibited from engaging in "political campaign intervention." This means that, among other restrictions, they cannot contribute funds to particular candidates or parties and they cannot lobby directly for particular electoral outcomes, although the regulations on lobbying for particular *issues* are complex.[25] If hosting a campaigning politician, a 501(c)3 organization must give equal opportunity to opposing candidates to speak. These limitations, while not always clear, and subject to evolving standards of implementation, help to define a sphere of independent and non-partisan activity among think tanks. In fact, most traditional think tanks have historically separated themselves from

electoral politics and even legislative politics more than is required by the restrictions imposed by their tax classification.

However, there has been a trend on the part of some think tanks to more directly influence the US political process and advocate particular ideological or partisan viewpoints. These organizations may find the 501(c)3 category too restrictive. Both Heritage and the Center for American Progress have set up parallel organizations under the 501(c)4 category in order to engage more directly in electoral politics and pursue particular legislative outcomes. Under this status, organizations classified as "social welfare or community benefit organizations" are allowed to contribute money to political candidates so long as their "primary purpose" is a social welfare or community benefit issue.

Classifying the "primary purpose" of an organization is somewhat subjective, and recent IRS adjudications of certain groups' statuses have been controversial. However, most organizations adhere to a model of ostensibly spending no more than 49.9% of their revenues on political campaign intervention in order to maintain the 501(c)4 status. 501(c)4 organizations are tax-exempt, but their donors receive no tax deduction from the IRS. Donors to 501(c)4 organizations may for the time-being remain anonymous, although this may soon change nationally—it already has in some states. The system of regulation for political campaign donations has been upended by the far-reaching and controversial *Citizens United* case in the Supreme Court, and the IRS, Congress, and state governments are still adapting regulations and implementing legislation accordingly.[26]

Heritage and CAP use the 501(c)4 status to directly engage in the US electoral system. They spend money on supporting candidates, public outreach and advertising, and grassroots organizing. *ThinkProgress.org*, a news blog associated with the Center for American Progress, is part of its 501(c)4 "Action Fund."

501(c)4 organizations have come under scrutiny in the United States given the lack of transparency associated with their funding and expenditures. Critics complain that the current regulatory framework too readily allows corporate interests or even in some cases single individuals to disguise their lobbying efforts as social welfare organizations. By moving some of their activities into this tax category, some think tanks associate their agendas with a realm of campaign financing and issue advocacy that most Americans are justifiably suspicious of. Some observers have also doubted the degree to which organizations like CAP and Heritage can truly separate their activities from their affiliated "action funds." Finally, even if think tanks can establish an effective wall between themselves and their lobbying and advocacy counterparts, the very fact that Heritage and CAP created "sister" 501(c)4 organizations in the first place underscores in the eyes of some the partisan intent of the original organizations.[27]

Think Tank Structures and Operations

In order to understand the activities of US think tanks, it is necessary to differentiate between different organizational structures that are commonly understood to be "think tanks." The structure of a research organization and its relationship to its funding sources influences both its institutional purpose and its day to day activities.

Most scholars who study American think tanks tend to agree that policy research organizations fall into three or four basic types based on their funding and activities. Donald Abelson offers the simplest typology of organizations with three groups: "universities without students," "government contractors," and "advocacy groups."[28] James McGann separates partisan or ideological activism from issue activism and creates a fourth category called "partisan." Thus to McGann, Heritage and CAP belong in the "partisan" category, while a group like Human Rights Watch belongs in the "activist" or advocacy category.[29] A sub-group of this "partisan" category is made up of institutions that are explicitly aligned not with a general left or right ideology, but with a particular political party. While in some nations such organizations can be important actors, they are virtually nonexistent in the United States. A few organizations explicitly supportive of the Democratic party have been created over the years. Only one, the Progressive Policy Institute, survives.

Because all think tanks profess independence in order to maintain their credibility, the difference between advocacy and research organizations isn't always obvious to outside observers. This is partly because advocacy think tanks wish to exploit the perceptions of objectivity associated with academic research in order to better serve their mission. Research institutes that are genuinely "academic" or independent tend to grant scholars more freedom in determining their research agenda, and are managed (to varying degrees) in a relatively collegial manner as in university departments. They are traditionally structured for producing policy research over the long term. Advocacy groups, on the other hand, are built around messaging more than research. As such, they tend to have top-down corporate-style management structures meant to facilitate effectiveness and efficiency in this enterprise. McGann points out that they can be operated much a like a newspaper, and are geared toward short-term policy briefs and other short publications.[30] That being said, there is no simple dividing line between "scholarship" and "advocacy" and too rigid a typology risks granting automatic legitimacy to the "scholars" and may unfairly denigrate the work of the "advocates."

Such distinctions are also eroding to some degree given recent trends in communications technology and funding. There is a growing tendency even at traditional academic organizations for management to make decisions about research agendas rather than the scholars themselves.[31] Moreover, traditional institutions like Brookings have to make an effort to produce more timely, short-form publications such as blogs in order to remain relevant. Brookings has also sought more corporate funding in recent years, which constrains researchers more than if they relied solely on the institution's endowment.[32] The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is often said to maintain the greatest degree of independence for its scholars because it can draw upon a considerable endowment.

It is relatively easy to distinguish the "contractors" from the other two groups. While most think tanks try to keep their involvement with government contract research to below 10% of their revenues, and many organizations like Heritage do no contract work at all, a small collection of research institutions receives the bulk of their funding from the US government. RAND, by far the largest think tank, receives more than three quarters of its annual revenues from the US government. The Urban Institute, which was founded by the Johnson administration to independently evaluate the president's social programs, receives about half of its revenue from the federal government. The United States Institute of Peace is fully funded by the US Congress or executive branch agencies. The work of RAND scholars typically focuses on analyzing proposed policy rather than generating new policies. As such, it and similar think tanks are likely to employ significant numbers of quantitative analysts and explore innovations in policy analysis. The work product of contracting organizations belongs to the contracting party (that is, usually the US government) and is not likely be disseminated publicly. This does not mean that these organizations are entirely directed by the needs of contracting parties: RAND, for example, maintains a self-directed research program with the small portion of its funding that comes from its endowment and donations. This allows it to generate a number of research products that are available to the public.

Think Tanks as Sources of Government Expertise and Personnel

The main objective of US think tanks is to influence policy, and interacting directly with government officials is the most direct means to this end. Most organizations pride themselves on being "idea factories" for the government. This concept presupposes both a susceptibility of government to outside influence and a relative inability of the government itself to generate new ideas.

The US government is unusually open to non-governmental influence and is particularly reliant on outside expertise for a number of reasons. First, the US has a smaller base of permanent civil servants from which to draw expertise and develop long-term strategies than most parliamentary democracies. Second, Americans traditionally rely on the President to generate large-scale initiatives and strategies and provide leadership to back them, even in areas where Congress has clear prerogative. (Take for example, the Affordable Care Act, which Congress had sole authority to enact, yet was championed and largely negotiated by the president and is generally called "Obamacare"). In foreign policy the President has significant inherent authority under the constitution. The character of presidential leadership means that candidates for the presidency face pressure to supply major new initiatives, and typically must rely on sources other than their predecessors' administrations or Congress for these ideas.

Third, American political parties have little of the party discipline that one can see in parliamentary democracies throughout the world. Party platforms are large and their principles are diverse and sometimes conflicting. Most important, politicians incur relatively few costs for

disagreeing with party leadership. This is mostly because US politicians do not require party sponsorship in order to run for office as representatives of their party. Because of the relatively loose structure of American political parties, there is a competition for ideas within parties as well as between them. Moreover, the parties themselves have difficulty generating innovative or unorthodox ideas from within. Fourth, private sector spending either to support the election of politicians or to advocate particular policies is a large part of American politics. Advocacy think tanks in the last few decades have increasingly taken part in both activities, including setting up parallel or "sister" organizations with different tax statuses in order to directly influence electoral politics.

Finally, the US government is unusually reliant upon a system of political appointments to fill countless positions, including all senior leadership posts in the executive branch. In fact, each president (or his/her executive staff) nominates approximately 3000 individuals to fill leadership or advisory positions, about 800 of which are senior enough to require Senate confirmation.[33] Many of these people come from previous administrations—for example, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' tenure spanned two presidents of different parties. But given the importance of party affiliation for many of these positions, very few of these appointments are considered permanent. Consequently, presidential administrations must be able to exploit a pool of non-governmental experts who are readily available for hire. Moreover, experienced bureaucrats are continuously leaving leadership positions as well—particularly after elections—and seek new jobs. The result is that the think tank-to-government-to-think tank cycle has become one of Washington's "revolving doors" where many policy experts alternate between different positions in government and policy research institutions. One scholar described the institution of think tanks on the whole as a "government in waiting."[34] Some organizations have staff dedicated to monitoring openings in the executive branch to help transition their scholars into government.[35] This dynamic strengthens the links between government and think tank research, but it also ensures that to varying degrees, partisan politics is present as well.

Government's reliance on think tank expertise is evident in a number of ways. First, think tanks are highly relied upon to provide expert testimony to Congressional committees. Different parties and members of Congress have favorite think tanks, and some clearly have more prestige on Capitol Hill than others.[36] Some think tanks have provided entire foreign policy initiatives to presidential candidates and presidents, including Ronald Reagan's ballistic missile defense plan.[37] At times, significant portions of a single think tank's staff have been recruited into leadership or advisory positions. Government is reliant in less obvious ways as well. Many experts with both think tank and government experience note that bureaucracies are not well-designed for generating ideas, and thus rely on incoming appointees to arrive with updated knowledge and policy initiatives generated in previous positions. During their tenure, appointees "use up" their "intellectual capital,"[38] and require time away from government conducting research or working in the private sector in order to refresh their thinking. Others observe that government officials simply have no time to innovate new policies or strategies given that the management tasks associated with implementing existing policy are all they have time for. Spending part of their careers in research organizations allows senior-level experts to focus exclusively on policy questions.

Underlying many of these features of think tanks is the United States' political culture, which is a relative outlier in the world of Western democracies. The US is an incubator for think tanks in part because of its cultural reliance on civil society to provide answers to social and economic problems. Americans tend to display a general skepticism regarding government power and competency, and have accordingly cultivated a government that has relatively few sources of permanent institutional knowledge or centers of uncontested authority. This decentralizes and privatizes many social/political functions, including the assessment of policy and the dissemination of information. This dynamic produces a large public but non-governmental space in the United States in which think tanks and other organizations can thrive. These organizations nonetheless rely on perceptions that they are authoritative institutions. As such, these decentralizing forces, which are accelerating in the age of new digital media, threaten to reduce think tanks to just some among the many voices in the already chaotic American "marketplace of ideas."

The Think Tank as an Alternative to University Research

Given the United States' great wealth of research universities, it is critical for think tanks to justify their separate existence. (It must be noted at the outset of this discussion that many think tanks operate within American universities in order to address policy issues in ways their traditional departments cannot.) Think tank scholars sometimes describe themselves as constituting a bridge between academic scholarship and the government or the public. However, think tanks often promote themselves by drawing distinctions between think tank and university research, arguing that much university scholarship is not useful to policymakers. Moreover, in the eyes of some Americans, the institution of the think tank as a whole is more representative of the full spectrum of American perspectives than universities are.

Think tank experts and policymakers will often point out that the research conducted at universities is not sufficiently policy-relevant because of increasing demands among professors to specialize and narrow their focus, resulting in the marginalization of university research in the public eye.[39] Others contend that university research is too directed toward establishing general causal laws or explanatory models, too theoretical, and not sufficiently focused on current issues. Moreover, academics are often described as being insufficiently aware of the constraints faced by policymakers and the political conditions in Washington necessary to ensure a proper reception of their ideas. In the foreign policy realm, explanatory frameworks that dominate the academic study of international relations (neorealism for example) are alleged to be of little use to policymakers, and are frequently dismissed or even denigrated in think tank circles.

In contrast, think tanks specialize in creating research products that meet the needs and tastes of government policymakers and lawmakers—focusing on the institutional concerns of the intended audiences, the political climate in Washington, and the timing of their report releases. To facilitate this, virtually all think tanks take on former senior government officials in leadership or advisory positions and some maintain a government relations office tasked with facilitating exchanges with government officials—some of the many reasons a Washington

location is critically important to many organizations. Think tank leaders also frequently point out that their mode of research allows for more interdisciplinary work than is possible in a university environment. This allows think tanks the flexibility to direct multiple lines of inquiry toward a single policy topic that is determined not by the constraints of a discipline, but by the needs of policymakers or the public interest. Both Brookings and RAND highlight interdisciplinary research as key features of their operations.

A final explanation for the growth of non-university research derives from ideological reasons. Since the 1960s, and continuing to this day, many voices have contended that American universities have become overwhelmingly leftist. Some conservatives claim they are not welcome in political science, history, or economics departments within universities and thus find conservative think tanks a more comfortable environment. This phenomenon has been linked to the birth of organizations such as Heritage and the more general rise of conservative think tanks in the 1980s that has resulted in a discernable right-of-center think tank environment in Washington.[40]

Think tanks must be careful not to distinguish themselves too much from university scholarship. Like university professors, think tank experts pride themselves on independence and the ability to provide deep understanding and contextual knowledge beyond that of journalists or the policymakers themselves. At the same time, institutions face increasing pressures to remain relevant and up-to-date within the new American "news cycle." This has resulted in an increase in Twitter or other social media activity, and an increase in the importance of blog posts in their work product. A senior official from the Hudson Institute declared that the era of the think tank-published book is over.[41] These changes present challenges to institutions in terms of quality control and peer-review processes, and can also blur the lines between scholarship and long-form journalism. Some organizations, like CAP or the New America Foundation, have embraced this trend and recruit journalists to work as both bloggers and experts.

Staffing and Organization

American think tanks are generally led by a president or CEO who is in charge of managing the daily affairs of the organization and ensuring adherence to its mission. The salaries for think tank heads and the heads of their major programs have grown over the years as the importance of recruiting well-connected executives has increased. Salaries for executives typically range from $200,000 to more than $600,000 at large organizations.[42] Executives are usually selected by and answer to a board of trustees comprised of influential people—often retired government officials or prominent businessmen. Beyond this, many organizations have advisory panels or boards for their major projects that also consist of these same elites. It is important for research organizations to be able to list many such influential individuals among their leadership in their annual reports, and these people also help with fundraising and ensuring that their research products are circulated in the right places.[43] Members of boards of trustees can be handsomely compensated, for example, AEI reported a $210,000 salary for former Vice President Dick Cheney in 2011.[44]

Think tanks adopt a variety of practices when it comes to their staffs of researchers. Most employ a model built around a core of resident scholars who are employed for the long-term. These scholars are usually called "senior fellows" or "resident fellows," though terminology varies from one organization to the next. A second tier of scholars are typically called "visiting" or "non-resident" fellows, and are taken on in various temporary programs. Think tanks often establish relationships with "adjunct fellows" as well, many of whom receive no payment. Adjuncts might not even enjoy any practical benefits such as use of meeting space or clerical support.

Figure 2: Senior and Junior Staff, Top 20 Think Tanks by Revenue

	Total Employees	Employees Earning >$100K
RAND	2,028	624
Brookings	563	129
Heritage	516	85
Urban Institute	427	110
CFR	471	17
WRI	331	50
AEI	211	29
CAP	328	9
NBER	653	17
CEIP	159	35
CSIS	333	50
Pew Research Centers	154	38
New America	174	21
CBPP	206	47
Cato	224	29
Atlantic Council	82	14
ICG	52	44
Wilson Center	163	17
Peterson / PIEE	75	9
Center for Global Development	77	19

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Senior scholars at think tanks do not enjoy the benefit of tenure like their university counterparts do. As such, there is no guarantee of long-term employment in organizations that often open or close lines of research depending on the headlines. For example, foreign policy research programs in the 1980s were heavily invested in Latin America, but research funding has since moved heavily in the direction of Middle East studies.[46] If a program is cut or downsized at a think tank, the scholars associated with it are expected to leave. The lack of tenure raises concerns in some quarters about the genuine independence of think tank scholarship. After all,

the institution of tenure at universities is meant to insulate scholars from pressures that might compromise their independence.

Think tanks also employ research assistants and research associates, writers, editors, and depending on their outputs, analysts and bloggers. The balance of all these employees depends on the operating model and desired research products. The more traditional model of think tank adopted by Brookings, AEI, CSIS and others, is more heavy on resident researchers. CFR has a larger share of adjunct scholars, and to some degree this affiliation is regarded as a membership designation in the US foreign policy elite. RAND and the Urban institute both employ hundreds of resident scholars. Organizations like CAP that focus on producing news, quick analysis of recent events and blogging, have very different ratios of junior to senior staff than an organization like Brookings. For example, CAP reports that approximately 2% of its staff earns a six-figure salary.[47] When interpreting "employees earning more than $100,000" as an indicator of senior scholars, Figure 2 provides a sense for the balance of senior and junior staff in the largest US organizations.

Think Tank Funding

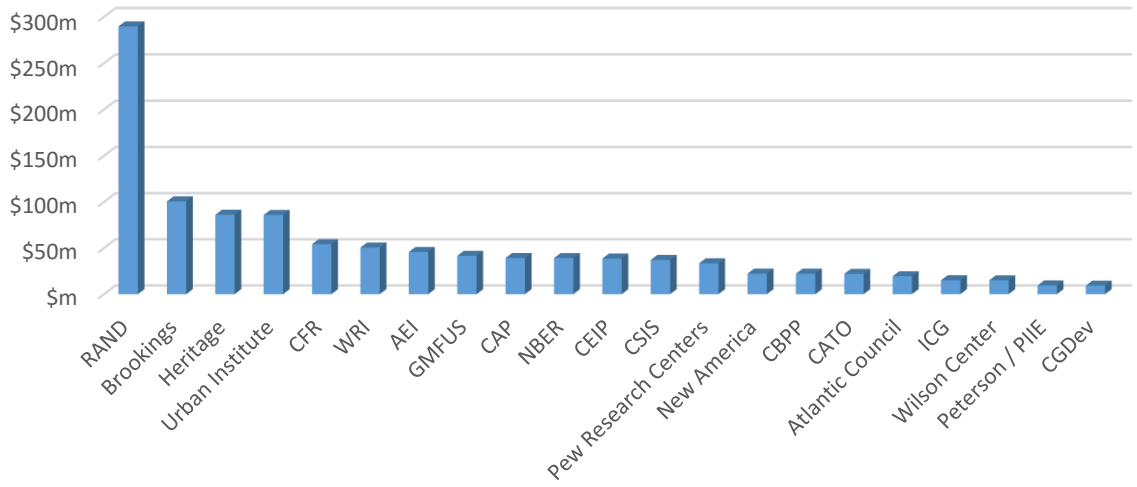
Think tanks employ a variety of models for funding their operations. Some, like Brookings or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, enjoy endowments in the hundreds of millions of dollars, similar to those of universities. Others, like RAND, operate on a contract-by-contract basis, their funds coming from their contracting clients. CAP and many other think tanks have relatively little in the way of endowments, and must operate largely off of fundraising. Many organizations lie somewhere in between, combining interest on endowments with fundraising from charitable foundations, corporations, and wealthy individuals, along with some government contracting.

There is significant variety in both revenues and assets even within the top twenty-one largest organizations. RAND's annual revenues dwarf that of most think tanks, and outside of the top ten or so largest organizations, most operate with annual budgets of a few million dollars or less. As of fiscal year 2013, Brookings and Carnegie both had assets in excess of $250 million, with Carnegie only spending the equivalent of 11% of its assets per year. By contrast, the assets of RAND and the Center for a New American Security equal only a small fraction of their yearly revenues.[48]

Fundraising is an important source of revenue for virtually all think tanks. They have traditionally considered diversified sources of funding to be important to maintaining independence. Even for Brookings, which enjoys the greatest assets among its peers, reaching out to foundations, corporate donors, and government agencies for additional funds is an important aspect of its employees' work. Advisory board members are expected to participate in fundraising, and in many think tanks, scholars are expected to help raise funds as well. At CSIS,

for example, scholars must help pay their way by bringing in grants for their projects and participating in fundraising, which according to some sources takes up considerable portions of their work-week.

Figure 3: 2013 Think Tank Revenues, Top 21 U.S. Organizations



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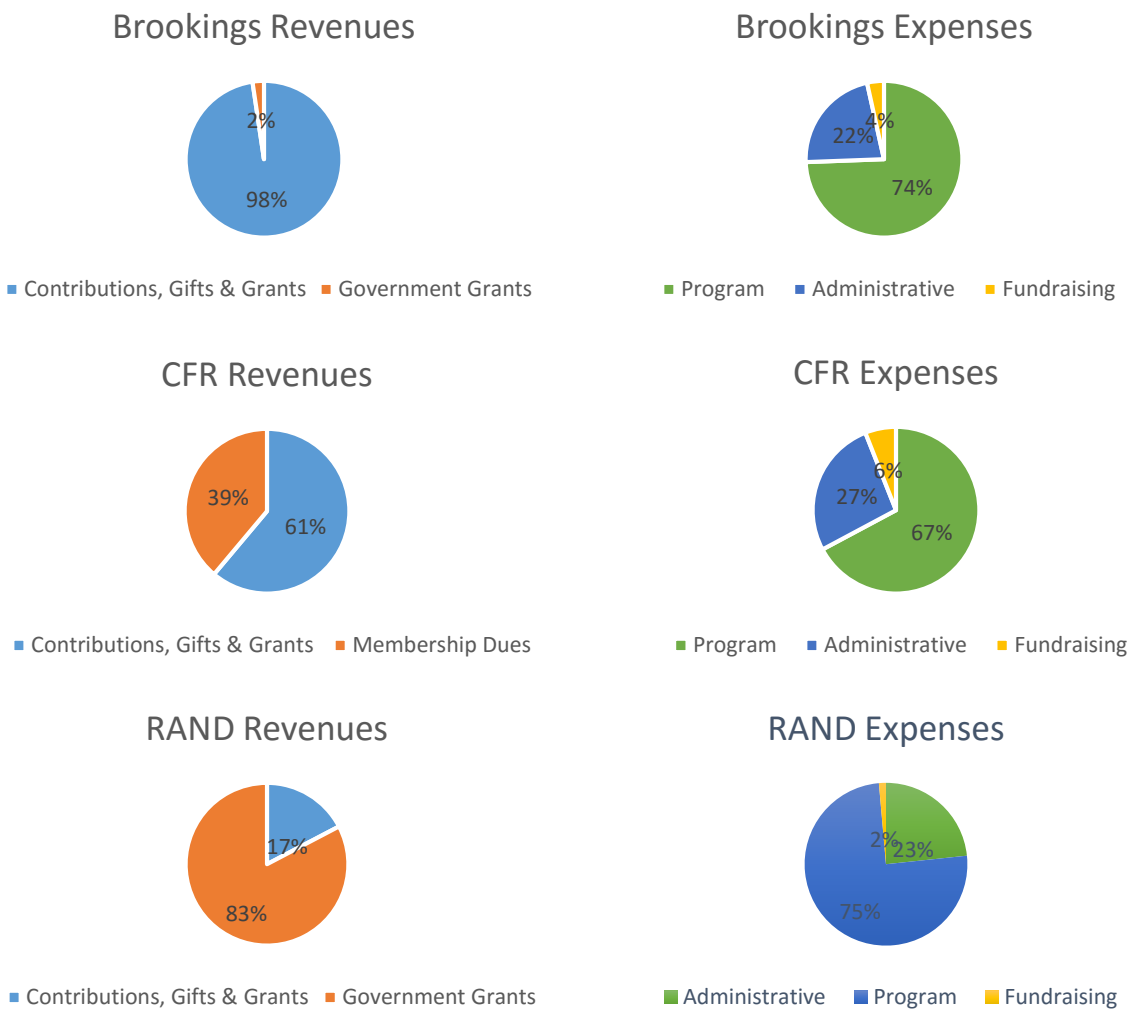
Corporations and business associations comprise a significant group of donors to many think tanks, contributing (according to some assessments) as much as 60-70% of the donations to some organizations.[50] Other studies involving different survey samples suggest that individual donors, followed by foundations, are the largest sources of income for many think tanks, and that corporate giving is in decline.[51] Donations from individuals and corporations are both greatly facilitated by the US tax code, as discussed in the insert above. Reliance on corporate money tends to inhibit organizations from promoting radical critiques of capitalism, and pushes them toward the ideological center of American politics.[52] Within the realm of foreign policy scholarship, the influence of active donors such as multinational petroleum companies and defense contractors like Boeing, Raytheon and others raises some concerns.

Increasingly, individual, corporate, and institutional donors have expected the right to designate their funds for particular projects, and have been more adamant about obtaining measurable "impact" from their contributions. This has introduced new constraints on scholarship. Think tanks are more mindful about how they quantify their influence, and must therefore focus on projects conducive to such measurement. This might mean favoring some projects over others, including ones with shorter time-horizons.

Money from the US or foreign governments is usually limited to a certain share of a think tank's budget because it is often perceived to have an especially negative affect on an organization's independence. Many think tanks cap government contract work at around 10-15% of their revenues, and some, like Heritage, take no government money at all. The Hudson

Institute has made the decision not to accept any money from what it considers to be non-democratic governments. Many think tanks, however, have accepted contracts from foreign governments and donations from influential foreigners and foreign business interests. While many think tanks make commitments to transparency regarding donors and clients, it is often difficult to find comprehensive disclosures. A full accounting of foreign donors for the Atlantic Council, for example, only came to light when its former president Chuck Hagel was nominated for Secretary of Defense, triggering a congressional review of the organization's connections.[53] Contracting organizations like RAND and the Urban Institute obviously don't conform to the pattern of limiting government influence. RAND relies on the US government for approximately 85% of its revenues annually.

Figure 4: Revenue and Expense Distributions of Selected Think Tanks, FY 2014[54]



The increasing role of donors in influencing the direction of think tanks raises important issues about the credibility of the research produced by these organizations. There is a tendency for donors to stipulate which projects they would like to fund, or even request particular lines of research. Think tanks try to minimize this kind of influence, but perennially must balance the

need to raise funds with the imperative producing objective and credible research. They employ various policies to ensure independence and objectivity. Some think tanks maintain a negative voice on a research team dedicated to pointing out weaknesses or bias in a particular line of research. Other organizations prohibit donors from instigating lines of research, but point them toward ongoing projects that they might like to fund. Think tank experts will point out instances in which donors have funded projects in hopes of the research supporting their own interests, only to find that the findings worked against them.

However, many have grown skeptical of think tanks' ability to mitigate the influence of donor funding on research, and some fear that policy objectivity is eroding. Former State Department official and think tank executive Kurt Campbell describes the notion of "objective analysis" in rather cynical terms. He describes the directive at some institutions to be "this is your objective, now go do the analysis."[55] Others describe the influence of money on research as being a more general and diffuse pressure. Rather than being required to deliver particular results, think tanks instead stay within a domain of options that is comfortable for donors: they are generally supportive of a status quo of capitalism, liberal international trade and high levels of defense spending.

Agendas and Ideologies in American Think Tanks

For better or for worse, think tanks operate in an American political environment that is increasingly polarized and they serve a public that is increasingly skeptical of purportedly authoritative or objective sources of information. Given their political culture, Americans have never relied very heavily on the government to fill this role. However, the trend has been for increasing numbers of news organizations, universities, and other institutions to be viewed—fairly or not—according to a left-right framework. Conservative activists in particular have been very successful in imposing this paradigm. They have presented institutions once considered mainstream—or representative of an elite or educated consensus—as being too far to the left of the political spectrum. This includes vast swathes of the of the American system of higher education and traditional print journalism.

Over the last several decades, conservatives have pushed for the establishment of counterbalancing institutions to offset the alleged left bias of these institutions. This includes a rise in conservative universities, newspapers, television stations, and beginning with the Heritage Foundation, think tanks. A liberal or leftist response has followed in turn. In the think tank world this resulted in the creation of the Progressive Policy Institute and the Center for American Progress. Many features of American public life now feature counterpart institutions, one on the left, and one on the right. On television MSNBC has evolved into the leftist counterpart of the conservative Fox News, and attempts to remain objective or impartial in the news media often come down to rigid formulas of giving equal time to views from the left and right.

Willingly or unwillingly, think tanks are inexorably drawn into partisan dynamics in Washington. Some explicitly embrace a partisan or ideological position, others seek to rise above partisan politics in order to remain independent, objective, and credible. Remaining purely centrist or bipartisan is very difficult, at least in the public's eye: some of the organizations that strive the hardest for independence are nonetheless regarded as leaning one way or another. This is caused in part by the fact that activists on the left and right seek to redefine the political "center" to their advantage and cast doubt on the objectivity of institutions with which they disagree.

Among organizations that embrace an ideological agenda, conservative or right of center think tanks are dominant. Andrew Rich observes that Republican or conservative organizations outspend Democrat or liberal think tanks by a ratio of three to one and outnumber them two to one.[56] This phenomenon has been explained as a reaction to the leftist bias of the American university system. According to this view, conservative scholars and donors have found think tanks a more comfortable environment in which to operate.[57] Others point out that leftist organizations (particularly ones critical of capitalism) will inherently have difficulty raising funds among the typical pool of think tank donors, which tend to be corporations or charitable funds created by industry leaders.[58]

Even though some think tanks explicitly embrace an association with a particular ideology they have traditionally been reluctant to associate too strongly with the political parties associated with those viewpoints. Only the Progressive Policy Institute has openly presented itself as a source of ideas for the Democratic party. Heritage, on the other hand, traditionally tried to maintain a separation between itself and the Republican party. From an organizational perspective this was to maintain independence as a research institution, but it also made it an effective and uncompromised advocate of a particular faction *within* Republican politics.

In 2013 Heritage hired former US senator Jim Demint to be its new president. According to many, Demint has taken steps to change the organization into more of a messaging apparatus of the Republican party. This transformation has upset many Heritage scholars, as well as the organization's founder.[59] The separation between CAP and the Democratic party is not entirely firm either. For example, CAP was routinely critical of the US war in Iraq throughout Republican President George W Bush's tenure, but became more supportive of US operations there once Democrat Barack Obama became president. According to a former CAP staffer, "people [at CAP] want to be good Democrats. They are very cautious about being out of step with Obama. It might happen occasionally, but it's not done lightly."[60]

Think Tanks and the American Political Spectrum

Assigning think tanks to a place on the "spectrum" of American political ideologies is an inherently subjective and imprecise operation. Nonetheless it may be useful for those outside Washington or the United States to have a general sense for the roles of these organizations in terms of partisan politics and broader political movements. Given that many organizations explicitly avow ideological agendas, this approach isn't entirely unwarranted, and an example of such an attempt is presented below.[61]

Progressive	Center-Left	Centrist	Center-Right	Libertarian*	Conservative
CAP	Carnegie Endowment	CFR	CSIS	Cato Institute	Heritage Foundation
Justice Policy Institute	Brookings	Nat'l Bureau of Economic Research	RAND Corporation	Reason Foundation	American Enterprise Institute
Worldwatch Institute	Urban Institute	Institute for International Economics	Washington Inst. for Near East Policy		Hoover Institution

Three caveats must be acknowledged here. First, think tanks, particularly large ones, will contain a great diversity of views among their resident experts. Even where institutional forces (such as the setting of research agendas) push scholars in particular directions, individual experts will vary in their policy prescriptions.

Second, many political scientists find that a visual representation of American political views requires at least a two-dimensional graph—for example, one which maps attitudes towards economic liberty on one axis and attitudes towards social or individual liberties on the other.[62] Because of this, libertarianism, represented by the Cato Institute, overlaps with elements on both the left and the right of American politics and doesn't entirely fit on the right. As such it has been marked here with an asterisk.

Finally, foreign policy approaches are particularly difficult to present along left/right or Democrat/Republican lines. The categorization of American attitudes on foreign policy has been a contentious subject in political science, and no consensus has been achieved even with regard to labeling the strands of thought in US foreign policy.[63] Proponents of interventionist policies can be found in both parties, and advocates of reducing America's role in the world can be found on the far left as well as among libertarians and some traditional conservatives. Both Republicans and Democrats may support a firm advocacy of human rights or democracy abroad, but one can find supporters of realism in both parties as well.

Despite the proliferation of advocacy think tanks, it is worth noting that some of the wealthiest and most influential organizations are stationed at the center of the political spectrum and maintain strongly bipartisan ties. These include CSIS, Carnegie, and Brookings. These organizations enjoy the most stable influence in Washington by dint of being accessible to government officials from both parties regardless of who controls the White House or Congress.[64]

Finally, while such organizations have largely been ignored in this report, it must be observed that some of the 1800 US "think tanks" are in truth thinly disguised lobbying groups of one kind or another. Regulators of think tanks, such as the IRS, are mostly interested in monitoring compliance with laws prohibiting influence in electoral processes. Outside of this domain, there is considerable room for various agendas to influence policy if their efforts are presented as research products. This "junk research" or "junk science" is produced by various trade organizations. For example, a public health research institute called Consumer Alert was found to receive major funding from tobacco, alcohol and chemical companies.[65]

The Question of Think Tank Influence

Think tanks seek to influence the policy process by a variety of means, and they position themselves to do so as effectively as possible. While it is often thought that American think tanks exercise considerable influence over the policy process in Washington, the effects of think tank activity are difficult to assess. For one, different organizations attempt to achieve different kinds of influence (or "impact" as it is often conceived of in the world American of non-profits). Moreover, whatever the type, influence or impact is often very difficult to quantify and assess. Finally, organizations often believe that some kinds of influence can inhibit their independence or appear to do so in the eyes of the public. All of these reasons combine to push some think tanks both to downplay what influence they have. In addition, some shy away from offering quantitative measures of success for fear of appearing ineffective, and many are somewhat vague about how they understand their own impact and define success.

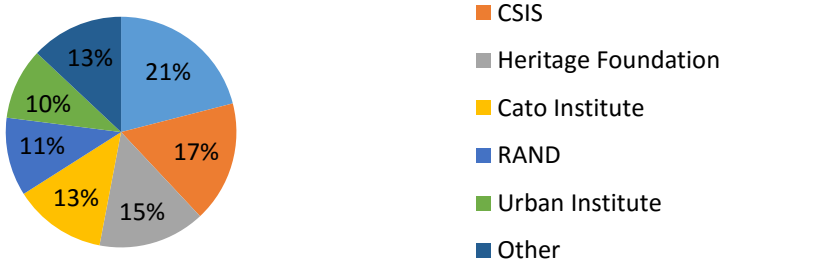
Since think tanks can seek so many kinds of influence—swaying public or elite opinion; creating new policies; affecting the implementation of existing policy; supplying government with new officials—measures of success vary. In response to demand by donors wishing to maximize the impact of their gifts, the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program at the University of Pennsylvania (itself a think tank) has instituted an ongoing, systematic study of think tank influence.[66] The study is a peer survey that asks think tank scholars to assess institutions according to a variety of criteria. The study's author, James McGann, classifies these "indicators" under four categories. Resource indicators include a think tank's ability to raise funds and acquire top talent. Utilization indicators measure the degree to which the media or government officials turn to a think tank's scholars for information. Output indicators measure the amount of publications produced. Impact indicators measure the degree to which a think tank's

recommendations are considered or adopted, or the degree to which scholars are included in transition teams, among other things.

To a large degree, these indicators are indirect measures—hence the careful choice of words. They are also difficult to disentangle from other influences and factors. From a social science perspective, therefore, impact and influence can be practically impossible to assess. As Donald Abelson points out, the US policymaking process is susceptible to influence in the stage of conception and the formulation of specifics, but it is also "episodic and arbitrary." [67] Policymaking is not a linear process and think tanks are only one among many inputs in any case. Moreover, it is difficult to disentangle think tank outputs from other influences in the "marketplace of ideas." For example, while the Heritage Foundation is widely regarded to have exercised immense influence in the Reagan White House with its publication *Mandate for Leadership*, Abelson claims that virtually all of the ideas contained in it were already circulating in conservative circles in Washington.[68] Whether the publication was itself the catalyst for Reagan-era policies or simply a catalog of prevailing conservative ideas is debatable.

These problems notwithstanding, think tank annual reports often cite the number of appearances their scholars make before congressional committees, or boast of the media coverage their work or their scholars receive. Internally, think tank leaders often regard television appearances as an important measure of influence.[69] Externally, think tank officials readily cite how often presidential candidates discuss their reports or provide anecdotes about their impact on government processes. In the eyes of one observer of think tanks, influence is measured in terms of whether a decision-maker has a think tank's study at his elbow when it comes time to write his memo on that policy area.[70]

Appearances by Major American Think Tanks before Congressional Committees, 1999-2008



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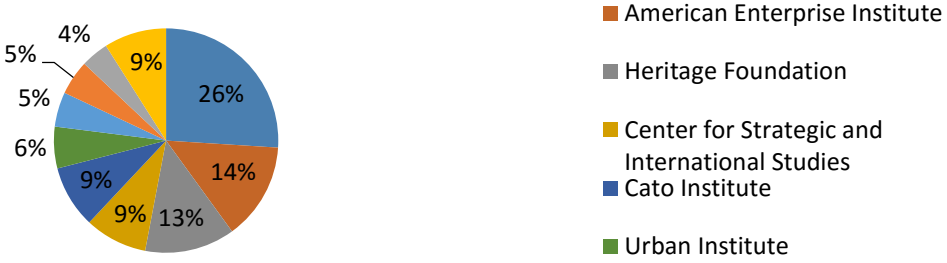
While it may be difficult to prove that these indicators are appropriate measures of influence, for those requiring a lower burden of proof than skeptical political scientists, they are nonetheless regarded as useful if blunt instruments for evaluating organizations. Analyzing them can also yield some important patterns. Some very small think tanks have, at times, achieved significant impact on US policy. For example, in 1980, defense researcher Daniel Graham's self-started think tank High Frontier produced a US defense strategy focused on transcending mutual nuclear deterrence and creating a strategic missile shield. His work struck a chord with the

incoming Reagan administration, allowing Graham unexpected access to White House leadership and a significant role in guiding Reagan to his controversial Strategic Defense Initiative. [72] However, most of the time, all indicators of influence point in the direction of large, well-funded institutions having the greatest impact on policymaking. One analysis of media visibility finds that money translates rather directly into exposure for a think tank in print and television news. Conservative or centrist organizations have a distinct advantage in this regard, and media exposure and the ability to attract still more funding seem to constitute a self-reinforcing dynamic. The authors of this report also note that Washington-based organizations are more successful in garnering media attention.[73]

References to Selected American Think Tanks, National News Media 1998-2008



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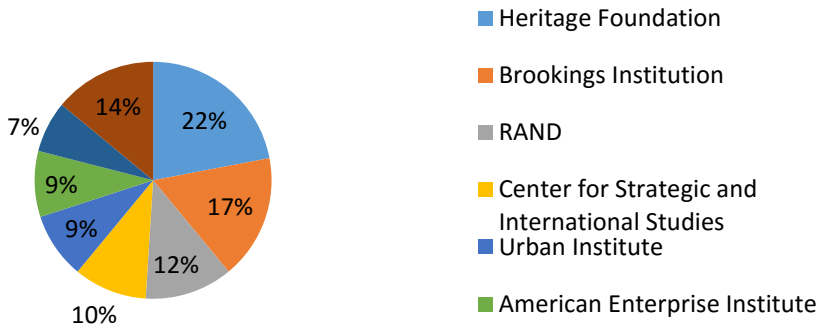
In fundamental ways, think tank scholarship makes certain compromises from the outset in order to achieve influence in Washington. This is not only because they constrain the scope of research to specifically "policy relevant" issues, but because maintaining policy relevance further entails discussing these issues in ways that policymakers are willing to listen to. Recommendations for far-reaching reforms are likely to fall on deaf ears, and lengthy treatises are unlikely to be read—all Heritage Foundation research products must meet the "airport rule" and the "briefcase rule," namely, reports must fit in a briefcase and be able to be read in their entirety on the cab ride from Reagan Airport to Capitol Hill (only a few miles). Moreover, the research products most useful to government officials may not simply be assessments of which policies are most effective from the broader perspective of the public interest. An extreme expression of this dynamic can be heard in the remarks of a US Navy admiral admonishing a group of scholars at a conference:

> "You academics should have no illusions that you have any influence on policy…the Navy knows what it wants; the policy papers you prepare have not one iota of influence on policy…however, if we can use your papers in our fights with the Army or the defense secretary or with the Congress…then we will use your arguments. But don't think you have any influence on real policy because we have already decided which way we want to go."[75]

Viewed skeptically, think tank research achieves influence over government not by considering the best possible policies, but, rather, the best possible policies based on the institutional interests and viewpoints of the relevant bureaucratic actors.

This problem can be exacerbated by the prevalence of former government officials in leadership positions. While such individuals work to maintain the relevance of policy research to its consumers, having government insiders on both sides of the equation can contribute to the "echo chamber" effect in Washington, wherein new ideas have difficulty overcoming established ways of thinking. Moreover, young scholars at think tanks are often looking to "ride the coattails" of senior leadership when they return to government in future administrations. Insofar as their outlook on what is "policy relevant" or feasible for the US government is shaped by their experiences under the tutelage of Washington insiders, they too may have difficulties seeing beyond prevailing attitudes on policy issues.

Total References to Selected Amerian Think Tanks in the U.S. Congress 1999-2008



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Other tradeoffs between influence and independence include the relationships of think tank staff and presidential candidates. While participating in transition teams, blue-ribbon panels or advising for candidates are all "impact indicators" of a research organization's success, these activities can harm perceptions of independence from a party or particular candidate. At worst, becoming too close to electoral politics could bring scrutiny from the Internal Revenue Service regarding prohibitions on non-profit organizations engaging in prohibited "political campaign intervention." A different type of tradeoff is presented by the increasing pressures for think tank scholars to appear as pundits on television. Many observers of think tanks have noted that if this goal is given too much priority, it can distort think tank research, causing it to focus on topics that are immediately appealing to television news, and susceptible to being addressed in brief exchanges.

The American Think Tank Present and Future: A Look at Trends

This report has indirectly touched upon a number of trends experienced by the world of American think tanks, many of which apply to think tanks around the world. An authoritative survey of trends faced by policy research organizations around the world can be found in the University of Pennsylvania Think Tanks and Civil Society Project's "Go-To Think Tank Reports" which are released annually.[77] This section will summarize some of these findings as well as the observations of other commentators.

Trends in funding are towards greater donor influence over what research gets funded and greater expectations from donors of measurable impact. This raises issues regarding the independence of the scholarship on the one hand, and raises questions about how to measure impact, and within what time-frame. Major charitable foundations have suffered as a result of the 2008 economic downturn, which has led to some apparent reduction in these funding streams.

The proliferation of institutions has increased competition between think tanks for available funds. This competition stimulates innovation, particularly in generating programs with measurable impact that appeal to new expectations from donor communities. As think tanks have multiplied over the last thirty years, they have also become more specialized. Very few organizations created during this time period are non-specialized or multi-issue/multidisciplinary.

Even with increased competition between organizations, many observers note that there is more demand for think tank research and more opportunities for think tanks to collaborate to solve problems. This is in part because public policy issues are increasingly complex and globalized, and the US government on its current trajectory is less likely to fund or coordinate large-scale research initiatives.

"New media" built upon internet connectivity has raised the profile of think tanks and granted them better tools for directly connecting to the public. Most organizations have intelligently capitalized on the Internet and new media such as podcasts to reach new audiences. They have created new products to educate the public and advocate for issues, and they continue to embrace innovation in new media. The rise of new media has also eroded the role of traditional journalists as intermediaries between the expert community and the public. This has inspired two trends. On the one hand, think tanks are more involved in short-form journalistic activities, from blog posts to actual news reporting. This has raised some new issues for organizations wishing to maintain quality control or peer review standards over the output of their scholars. On the other hand, journalists are increasingly seeking employment in think tanks as jobs at traditional media dwindle.

Globalization has contributed to more domestic and global demand for American think tank research. Americans are more aware of foreign policy and global issues, and the Internet allows American organizations to have greater influence abroad. US organizations like Carnegie and Brookings have opened multiple locations around the world, and Carnegie now brands itself as "the global think tank."

The so-called "24/7 news cycle" in the US, in which cable television news is hungry for constant input from experts and commentators, has done much to raise the public profile of think tanks—especially those in Washington. However, organizations that seek visibility in this medium risk shaping their research agendas to suit the needs of television news producers looking for discussion of flashpoint, hot-button issues or fleeting events.

Political polarization—the process by which legislative cooperation between parties becomes ever more difficult and American politics divides into uncompromising camps—continues apace in Washington and the US more broadly. This environment has affected think tanks. Some scholars find themselves uncomfortable with the increased partisanship of their organizations and researchers may find it more difficult to generate policy ideas that can be accepted on a bipartisan basis.

Finally, as think tanks face more competition to maintain influence and relevance while protecting their independence and credibility, the tradeoffs inherent in these goals become more apparent, and the balance more precarious. As think tanks engage in advocacy activities, their focus can shift from creating new solutions to policy problems to "marketing" existing partisan policies, or "recycling" ideas as some have described it. If the institution of the think tank goes too far down this path, it will be incapable of distinguishing itself from the crowded field of non-governmental advocacy groups operating in the political sphere. Without providing genuinely new and independent ideas, think tanks will not be able to maintain their reputation for credibility, and will simply contribute to the Washington "echo chamber." In the pessimistic words of one commentator,

> "Some new think tanks…are less likely to expand the range of options under debate. Rather, these institutions are helping politicians avoid the difficult task of pursuing creative policy solutions by giving them ways to persist in failed courses. There are still great exceptions in the think tank world…but they increasingly have trouble being heard above the din."[78]

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Notes

[1] McGann (2015) pp. 53, 54.
[2] Gutbrod (2014).
[3] Troy (2012) p. 75.
[4] Graph compiled from data published in Gutbrod (2013).
[5] Troy (2012) p. 77.
[6] ibid.
[7] RAND "History and Mission" http://www.rand.org/about/history.html
[8] Edwards (1997).
[9] "About Us" www.heritage.org/about
[10] Rich (2005) pp. 42, 115.
[11]McGann (2015) p. 10.
[12] Troy (2012).
[13] ibid p. 80.
[14] Wiarda (2008) p. 110.
[15] For example, a CSIS expert wrote Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's 2013 speech at the Shangri-La Asia security conference, (Bender 2013).
[16] This concern is documented in McGann (2014).
[17] Haass (2002).
[18] Adapted from Abelson (2006) pp. 148, 153.
[19] Troy (2012) p. 75.
[20] Rich (2005).
[21] "About US" Center for American Progress, https://www.americanprogress.org/about/mission/
[22] Wiarda (2008) p. 109.
[23] "American Perceptions Initiative" http://www.heritage.org/Home/Research/Projects/api
[24] Center for Data Analysis, http://www.heritage.org/about/staff/departments/center-for-data-analysis/cda-featured-issues.
[25] Harvard Law School (2002).
[26] See Constantine (2013).
[27] Troy (2012) p. 87.
[28] Abelson (2009) p. 18-20.
[29] McGann (2009) p. 82.
[30] McGann (2005) p. 8.
[31] Wiarda (2008) p. 112.
[32] ibid p. 106.
[33] Presidential Appointments and Managing the Executive Branch [Political Appointee Project], http://www.politicalappointeeproject.org/commentary/appointments-and-managing-executive-branch
[34] Troy (2012) p. 75.
[35] Abelson (2009) p. 154.
[36] Abelson (2009).
[37] Abelson (2006).
[38] This metaphor was expressed by one of the discussants in Wilson Center (2013).
[39] Troy (2012) p. 83.
[40] ibid p. 80. For the imbalance towards conservative views see Rich (2005) pp. 42; 115.
[41] Wilson Center, (2013).
[42] Silverstein (2013).
[43] Wiarda (2008) p. 111.
[44] Silverstein (2013).

[45] Graph compiled from data published in Gutbrod (2013).
[46] Wiarda (2008) p. 1112.
[47] Gutebrod (2013).
[48] ibid.
[49] Data from Gutebrod (2013).
[50] Wiarda (2008).
[51] Chafuen (2013).
[52] Wiarda (2008) p. 115
[53] Bender (2013).
[54] Source, Internal Revenue Service. www.irs.gov
[55] Quoted in Bender (2013).
[56] Rich (2005) pp. 42, 115.
[57] Troy (2012) p. 81.
[58] Wiarda (2008) p. 113.
[59] Ball (2013).
[60] Unnamed CAP staffer quoted in Silverstein (2013).
[61] Chart adapted from presentation in McGann (2005).
[62] There are different ways of labeling the axes, but two are necessary in order to deal with the fact that Democrats generally are accepting of government intervention in the economy but not in matters of individual choices, whereas Republicans typically reject government intervention in the economy yet are more accepting of authoritative constraints on individuals' choices. Libertarians reject both forms of government intervention.
[63] See for example Mead (2001) and McDougall (1998) for two systems of categorization.
[64] Wiarda (2012).
[65] Harvard Law School (2002) p. 1514.
[66] http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=think_tanks
[67] Abelson (2006) p. 226.
[68] Abelson (2009) p. 89.
[69] Troy (2012) p. 87.
[70] Wiarda (2008) p. 112.
[71] Data from Abelson (2009).
[72] Abelson (2009) pp. 186 ff.
[73] Rich and Weaver (2000).
[74] Data from Abelson (2009).
[75] Quoted in Wiarda (2008) p. 99.
[76] Data from Abelson (2009).
[77] www.gotothinktank.com
[78] Troy (2012) p. 90.