U.S. Think Tanks and the Intersection of Ideology, Advocacy, and Influence

by Andrew Rich

The ranks of think tanks in the United States have experienced three major developments in recent decades: (1) Their numbers have grown substantially; (2) many, especially newer, think tanks have adopted identifiably ideological missions; and (3) many, especially newer, think tanks have become quite aggressive advocates and promoters of their research and ideas. All three developments have been widely reported, but the extent of these trends and the empirical connections between them remain somewhat ambiguous, however.

In this essay, I examine the growth among U.S. think tanks in recent decades, especially the differences in number and size of think tanks representing broadly conservative versus liberal ideologies. I provide evidence that bolsters the common perception that by the mid-1990s, identifiably conservative think tanks greatly out-numbered identifiably liberal ones. Conservative think tanks also more often pursue an advocacy-oriented style than liberal think tanks, and conservative think tanks do so more easily than their liberal counterparts. Conservative think tanks in the U.S. typically have more resources to devote to promotion, and a promotional style is more suited to their organizational preferences than is the case for liberal ones. I conclude by suggesting that these advantages may not necessarily translate into greater policy influence for conservative think tanks than for their liberal counterparts. In their more advocacy-oriented efforts, conservative think tanks have become highly visible in immediately pending policy debates. But more substantive and important opportunities for think tanks to be influential may come earlier in the policymaking process when they can affect the framing of issues and the types of alternatives available to address new problems. By most accounts, newer, especially conservative think tanks are not as active or as influential in these efforts as their numbers and resources might suggest possible.

THE PROLIFERATION OF THINK TANKS IN THE U.S.

Between 1970 and 1996, the number of think

tanks operating in the United States grew from fewer than 60 to more than 300 (Rich 1999). This proliferation of new think tanks occurred during a period when new interest groups and other types of political organizations were also forming in great number in the U.S., with a common eye toward contributing to and influencing public policy debates. What is remarkable is that amid the proliferation of think tanks, great variation emerged in their guiding ideologies. In my analysis, think tanks are defined as independent, non-interest-based, nonprofit political organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policy-making process.

Organizations are categorized as identifiably conservative or liberal based on listed priorities in their mission statements and annual reports, ideological categories that correlate with the portrayal of think tanks in the news media. Think tanks are grouped as conservative if they refer to a particular concern for promoting the free market system, limited government, individual liberties, religious expression, or traditional family values. Think tanks are grouped as liberal (in the contemporary American sense) if they refer to a particular concern for using government policies and programs to overcome economic, social, or gender inequalities, poverty or wage stagnation, or if they call for progressive social justice, a sustainable environment, or lower defense spending. Organizations not classified into either broad ideological category are categorized as "centrist or of no identifiable ideology."

This last group, think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology, made up the largest single category of think tanks in 1996 (141 think tanks or 45 percent of the total). This finding is not surprising, given the long history of think tanks in the United States producing balanced or non-ideological research (Smith 1991). What is remarkable, however, is that a majority of think tanks in 1996 were identifiably ideological in character, either conservative or liberal. In 1996, 165 of the 306 think tanks in existence—54 percent—were avowedly conservative or liberal, broadly defined. By contrast, in 1970 only fourteen of the fifty-nine think tanks in existence were identifiably conservative or liberal; three-quarters of the fifty-nine pre-1970 organizations were centrist or of no identifiable ideology.

IN THEIR MORE ADVOCACY-ORIENTED EFFORTS, CONSERVATIVE THINK TANKS HAVE BECOME HIGHLY VISIBLE IN IMMEDIATELY PENDING POLICY DEBATES. BUT MORE SUBSTANTIVE AND IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THINK TANKS TO BE INFLUENTIAL MAY COME EARLIER IN THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS WHEN THEY CAN AFFECT THE FRAMING OF ISSUES AND THE TYPES OF ALTERNATIVES AVAILABLE TO ADDRESS NEW PROBLEMS.

Among the greatly expanded ranks of avowedly ideological think tanks, conservative think tanks have come to substantially outnumber liberal organizations. Of the 165 ideological think tanks, roughly two-thirds (65 percent) are avowedly conservative; only one-third (35 percent) of them are identifiably liberal. The differences in number between identifiably conservative versus liberal think tanks are especially pronounced at the state and local level. By the mid-1990s, a full one-third of the think tanks operating in the United States—100 organizations—were principally concerned with state and local issues, as opposed to national matters. At the state level conservative think tanks emerged at an overall rate of 3.5 each year between 1985 and 1995, more than three times the rate of liberal organizations (0.9

each year). Among national think tanks, conservative think tanks emerged at a rate (2.6 per year) that was twice that of liberal organizations (1.3 each year) between 1985 and 1995. Nationally focused think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology emerged at a rate of 2.7 each year through this period. At the state level, this category of think tank emerged at a rate of 1.3 each year.

By the mid-1990s, 47 identifiably conservative think tanks were operating in 34 of the 50 states; by contrast only 22 liberal organizations were visible in just 15 states. Almost half of the state and local think tanks (44 percent) operating in the 1990s were conservative, compared to a bit less than one-third of the nationally focused organizations that were conservative. At both the state and national levels, identifiably liberal think tanks made up only about one-fifth of all organizations.

The asymmetries between conservative and liberal think tanks go beyond differences in numbers; conservative think tanks also tend to have more resources and broader missions than their liberal counterparts. Whereas conservative think tanks outnumber liberal organizations by a ratio of roughly 2 to 1, conservative think tanks outspend liberal think tanks by more than 3 to 1 in the United States. In 1995, the total resources of conservative state and locally focused think tanks were roughly $28.4 million, compared to $8.8 million for liberal organizations at the state and local level.

Conservative think tanks in the United States are more often full-service in the breadth of their missions than liberal think tanks. Conservative think tanks more often produce or promote research about a broad range of policy issues, including at the national level both foreign and domestic policy topics; liberal think tanks are more often focused on only single or several issues (e.g., women's rights, low-income housing). At the national level in 1996, 21 percent of conservative think tanks were full-service, whereas only 8 percent of liberal think tanks—three organizations—had such a breadth of concerns. At the state and local level, an overwhelming 85 percent of

identifiably conservative think tanks were full-service, concerned with a broad range of state and local issues. By 1996, there were 40 full-service conservative think tanks in thirty-one of the fifty states. By contrast, only 41 percent of liberal state and local think tanks were full-service, resulting in just thirteen organizations in nine states.

All of these data combine to demonstrate a strong trend among the ranks of think tanks in the U.S. In the thirty year period since 1970, as the number of think tanks in the United States has more than quadrupled, ideological think tanks have emerged in substantially greater numbers than think tanks of no identifiable ideology, and identifiably conservative think tanks have come to greatly outnumber identifiably liberal organizations. Not only do conservative organizations outnumber liberal organizations at the national and state levels, but they also consistently outpace liberal organizations in the size of their budgets and in the breadth of their research agendas.

LINKAGES BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND ADVOCACY

The asymmetry in number, size, and

research coverage of conservative versus liberal think tanks in the U.S. suggests that the former have certain advantages in American policymaking. These apparent advantages may be enhanced by the greater propensity for conservative think tanks to pursue the aggressive advocacy and marketing of their products than their liberal counterparts. The strategies of conservative think tanks regularly include efforts to market and promote research and to achieve high profile and immediate impact in policy debates.

The conservative Heritage Foundation, founded in 1974, set the standard for marketing research, developing an ability to produce timely, short, faxable briefs on any pending issue that might reach Congress. The Heritage Foundation consistently devotes nearly twenty percent of its annual budget, which in 1998 was $28.6 million, to promoting its research and ideas with legislators and the news media. It has more than a dozen full-time staff devoted to coordinating relations with the House of Representatives and Senate and with national news media and local news outlets around the country.

The strategies and organizational structure of the Heritage Foundation have served as a model for scores of new conservative think tanks, both large and small. These think tanks have sought to emulate Heritage's strategy of devoting a substantial portion of its institutional budget to marketing and advocacy, in the case of some small think tanks spending more on marketing than on research. At the same time, some older conservative think tanks have moved from producing books and formal reports—historically the product of think tanks—to focusing on shorter monographs and policy briefs. These shifts are in part a reflection of the competition wrought by Heritage and the scores of other new organizations. It also reflects a feeling that policymakers will not take the time to read long products. One scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank formed in 1943, observes, "We're pretty convinced that people just don't read books in the way that they once did. You can produce things more quickly that are shorter. You can get out a monograph or an occasional paper or something of that sort, and I think you can perhaps be more influential."

THE STRATEGIES OF CONSERVATIVE THINK TANKS REGULARLY INCLUDE EFFORTS TO MARKET AND PROMOTE RESEARCH AND TO ACHIEVE HIGH PROFILE AND IMMEDIATE IMPACT IN POLICY DEBATES.

While many liberal, centrist, and especially older think tanks are critical of how close some conservative think tanks—especially the Heritage Foundation—come to crossing boundaries of both legal and credible conduct in their pursuit of visibility, many of these same think tanks acknowledge some need to emulate Heritage's promotional style, even if not as aggressively. As the former president of the Urban Institute, a contract research think tank that evaluates social programs, pointed out several years ago, "Increasingly [our researchers] want to see [their studies] out there and public, and I am encouraging that … I have, more in the last ten years than earlier, encouraged people to get it out there." Likewise, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Economic Policy Institute, and the Institute for Policy Studies, all liberal think tanks, have become more visibility-oriented, seeking to gain a wider and often more public audience for their research and ideas than once was the case.

The challenge for the more liberal think tanks is to find the resources necessary to make more promotional strategies successful and the ideological and practical tolerance among their staff to make these strategies internally acceptable. Think tank leaders have two options if they wish to make advocacy and promotion more central to their organizations" missions: The leaders can either find ways to expand the size of their organizational budgets, thereby permitting more resources to

be devoted to advocacy, or they can redirect existing resources toward promotion. New funding for liberal think tanks is scarce. In fact, while the disproportionate proliferation of conservative think tanks in recent decades has been supported by a new and committed cadre of conservative foundations, liberal think tanks have experienced some shrinkage among their traditional sources of support in recent decades, especially in the commitments of private foundations like the Ford Foundation.

If growth is unlikely for liberal think tanks, the choice for their leaders if they wish to become more advocacy-oriented is a reallocation of existing resources—in many cases a reallocation away from producing new research and toward promotional efforts. But this is not a transfer of resources that liberal think tanks appear fully willing to make. Whereas many small conservative think tanks choose advocacy and promotion over research, when faced with limited resources, small liberal think tanks tend to choose research over promotion. For conservatives, think tanks are vehicles for promoting ideas, and if resources are scarce, they view limited dollars as better spent on synthesizing and promoting research produced by others (either by academics or larger think tanks) than on trying to produce new studies. Leaders of liberal think tanks have been less comfortable using organizational resources to promote others' ideas. Liberals tend to devote their limited resources for think tanks to hiring researchers or conducting new studies first, often leaving little for promotion and advocacy.

Moreover, leaders of liberal think tanks tend to be uncomfortable enforcing procedures that discipline staff researchers to produce studies on timely subjects and make them and their products individually visible among policymakers. Conservative think tanks, by contrast, often have well-established hierarchies whereby staff researchers are compelled to produce reports on pending policy questions and produce them with a plan for their promotion. In the end, the combination of greater resources and organizational and ideological preferences that favor promotional efforts provides conservative think tanks an advantage over liberal organizations in the advocacy and marketing of research and ideas.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF STRATEGIC AND NUMERICAL DIFFERENCES FOR INFLUENCE

If conservative think tanks appear to enjoy a range of organizational advantages over their liberal counterparts, it is not obvious that they carry over to benefit conservatives in the ultimate substantive influence of think tanks in policymaking. At first glance, it appears that conservative think tanks should have more influence in American policymaking than their liberal counterparts. After all, their numbers, resources, and strategies should give them some advantage in efforts to inform decision-makers. And, in fact, in a 1996 poll of congressional staff and journalists, almost three-quarters of respondents (72 percent) identified conservative think tanks as having greater influence in American politics than liberal think tanks. In their greater numbers and with their more aggressive strategies, conservative think tanks have certainly raised the profile of think tanks generally in American policymaking in recent decades.

> THE CHALLENGE FOR THE MORE LIBERAL THINK TANKS IS TO FIND THE RESOURCES NECESSARY TO MAKE MORE PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES SUCCESSFUL AND THE IDEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL TOLERANCE AMONG THEIR STAFF TO MAKE THESE STRATEGIES INTERNALLY ACCEPTABLE.

And yet in their emphasis on advocacy and promotion—and in their corresponding concern with obtaining visibility in immediately pending policy debates—it may be that conservative think tanks have not

secured meaningful, substantive influence in policy decisions in proportion to their organizational advantage. The content and timing of many of the products released by conservative think tanks are targeted to make them more useful among policymakers looking for support for pre-existing points of view than for those looking for new knowledge or understanding on topics. If a member of Congress needs help justifying a position in favor of school vouchers, for example, or needs help convincing colleagues of the merits of a position on vouchers, she might use a glossy, timely think tank product to help make her case. Conservative think tanks have invested great amounts to produce research ready and suitable for this purpose.

But more substantive and important opportunities for think tanks to be influential may come earlier in the policymaking process when they can affect how issues are framed and the types of alternatives available to address new problems. By most accounts, newer, especially conservative think tanks are not devoting as much time and resources to these efforts. While it is during these agenda-setting moments in the policy process that think tanks and policy experts generally have historically had their best chance to make substantive contributions to how policy looks, new think tanks have not spent most of their increased resources on these types of efforts as their numbers have proliferated. This is not to say that conservative think tanks do not make important contributions to agenda setting on some issues. But their influence in agenda setting is not proportional to their organizational numbers and resources. As a result, it appears that the substantive influence of think tanks overall in American policymaking has not expanded nearly in proportion to their increase in number and visibility since 1970. And despite the substantial numerical, resource, and marketing advantage of conservative think tanks, they may not have substantially greater substantive influence in policymaking than their liberal counterparts.

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Suggested Readings

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