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PREDATORS AND PRINCIPLES: THINK TANK INFLUENCE,  
MEDIA VISIBILITY, AND POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor  
of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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## **Abstract**

By some measures, the major U.S. political parties have become more extreme in their political positions in recent decades, and scholars have raised concerns about whether the policy expertise provided by today's think tanks has become similarly partisan and polarized. Furthermore, there is a perception that certain overtly partisan and highly visible think tanks wield considerable and growing influence over the policy platforms of the major U.S. parties, using their media presence to shape public and policymaker views of particular issues. Using publicly accessible tax, media, and congressional data, my proposed study assesses the extent to which media visibility and political partisanship explain the degree of influence that modern think tanks have on policy outcomes. First, I identify which think tanks are the most influential, as measured by interactions with policymakers—namely, requests to testify at congressional committees (Abelson, 2002; Rich & Weaver, 2000). I then use multiple regression analyses to assess to what extent these measures of influence are associated with think-tank media exposure (as measured by mentions in major news sources and social media metrics) and political partisanship, adapting the methodologies of Rich and Weaver (2000) to measure the former and Groseclose and Milyo (2005) to measure the latter.

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## Introduction

In the ideal technocratic society, policy experts assess the merits and demerits of policies and then advise policymakers while being insulated from partisan political considerations (Kingdon, 2011; Lasswell, 1958). Among think tanks, which often provide such expertise, this principle of nonpartisanship is the basis for the tax-exempt status of these organizations. Recently, however, scholars have raised concerns about whether the policy expertise provided by today's think tanks has become partisan and polarized (Medvetz, 2012; Pautz, 2012; Peschek, 1987), particularly as the dominant policy shops have become more reliant on foreign funding and wealthy individual donors. Furthermore, there is a perception that certain overtly partisan think tanks, such as the conservative Heritage Foundation and liberal Center for American Progress, wield considerable and growing influence over the policy platforms of the major U.S. parties (Rich, 2004), even as a smaller circle of think tanks are tapped for publicly-funded contract research, and policy shops previously relied upon by Congress for their neutrality, like the Office of Technology Assessment, have closed (Bimber, 1996).

Imagination may have the better part of the population when after 100 years of proliferation pass, public comprehension of think tanks remains clouded. Hashemi and Muller (2018) note that only half of American adults know what a think tank is or does, and this rate increases to just 63 percent among “spectators” — those interested in politics. In further analysis of “insiders” — those who work in politics, policy, or government — 71 percent of insiders agree that think tanks serve the interest of the elite.

At the same time 64 percent of insiders “trust in think tanks,” 28 percent of “spectators” feel the same.

The ideological conflict among think tanks in the modern era parallels a broader polarization of the country’s political climate. Polarization occurs when parties are “far apart on policy issues, and the party members must be tightly clustered around the party mean” (Poole & Rosenthal, 2011). Various measures of partisanship have found that the two political parties have become increasingly polarized (Hacker & Pierson, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mann & Ornstein, 2012; for a dissenting view, see Lee, 2015). For example, the government website govtrack.us (2018) calculates an ideology score for all members of Congress, based on the number of bipartisan sponsorships over the previous five years—the assumption being that Members of Congress with similar values will cosponsor bills, and that those with dissimilar values will cosponsor different bills. According to these data, there is only one Republican senator who stands to the left of the most conservative Democrat; in the House, there are just three Democrats to the right of the most liberal Republican. Utilizing a spatial model of voting records, another analysis finds that roll call votes in Congress now show levels of party polarization not witnessed since the Civil War (Hare & Poole, 2014).

Though both parties have exhibited a polarizing tendency urged on by wealthy backers and political elites, some scholars argue that the Republicans show signs of a more radical leap next to the drift of the Democrats (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-statist views came to dominate the Republican Party (Critchlow D. , 2007). The Democratic Party, in turn, found itself more and more reliant on financial backers outside



of organized labor, including the financial services industry (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). With the need to appease the financial sector and business interests, many Democratic politicians rejected policies that hinted at redistribution or negatively affected the autonomy of corporate managers, resulting in a working class without a party (Packer, 2008) and reducing the political landscape to an elite struggle between the “Brahmin left” of intellectual elites and the “Merchant right” of business elites (Piketty, 2018).

The role of think tanks in this transitioning political economy is the overall focus of this project, the transfer of evolving ideas into policy as attempted by think tanks. My theoretical framework of policy making is built upon the work of John Kingdon and Peter Temin. I will examine the agenda-setting capacity of think tanks from their role as unofficial policy actors, particularly how they navigate the modern political and media landscape to influence policy-makers. These four questions further lend clarity to the scope of my study:

1. Which think tanks appear more frequently before congressional committees?
2. To what extent is a think tank’s media visibility associated with think tank authority as measured by congressional appearances?
3. To what extent is a think tank’s degree of political partisanship associated with think tank influence as measured by congressional appearances?
4. To what extent is a think tank’s degree of political partisanship associated with media visibility measured by media references?

To provide context for this proposed project, I begin by outlining definitional complexities in the think tank environment. Then, I present a brief historical assessment of the changing political context affecting expert policy advising over the past century, a context within which think tanks have, at times, prospered as a relatively unified interest group. From early on, think tanks purported to provide value-free expertise based on technical

rationality, a claim that has become more dubious as ideological consensus has waned. Meanwhile, technological advancements in the media landscape have weakened the dominant position of the general-interest mainstream media and have allowed for the emergence of a multitude of more specific-interest and partisan outlets. This trend, I propose, may be compelling think tanks to maintain high public visibility and cater to more politically polarized audiences in order to remain relevant and influential. I end with an overview of my proposed research methods.

## **The idea brokers**

A *think tank* derives its name from warfare. Drawing from the metaphor of armored transports, the term first referred to secure rooms where intelligence officers would formulate military strategy (Smith J. A., 1991). This nomenclature was easily carried over to strategic efforts on the political and social battlefield after World War II, when policymakers took the view that societal problems could be solved if they dedicated enough high-velocity brainpower to them. By the 1950s, government contract research organizations like the RAND Corporation were being identified with this term, and a class of idea brokers proliferated.

Medvetz (2012) considers the definition of think tanks a “murky object.” Scholars have put forward a wide variety of understandings of what should or should not fall into this organizational category. According to Stone (1996), these definitions range from the inclusive to narrow. For example, Orlans (1972, p. 3) broadly describes think tanks as “non-degree granting” institutions, which Weaver (1989), in turn, divides into three categories: universities without students, contract researchers, and advocates. Medvetz

(2012) describes think tanks as existing in a “hybrid interstitial field” linking business, media, academic, and government worlds. Think tanks assemble relationships with actors in each of these four organizational areas, he argues; the optimal position is in the center, with proficiencies in all four corners. More narrowly, Abelson (2006, p.10) defines think tanks as “independent, non-profit, tax-exempt organizations engaged in the study of public policy.”

With this lack of consensus in mind, the definition of think tanks that I will use here comes from Rich (2004, p.11), who describes them as “institutions that actively seek to maximize public credibility and political access to make their expertise and ideas influential in policy making.” This definition is well-suited to my study, given its focus on think tanks with significant public outreach and influence in Congress, particularly during the policy agenda-setting stage.

According to McGann’s 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index (GGTTI), there are 6,846 think tanks across the globe (McGann, 2018). (For his part, McGann (1995) avoids a strict definition of think tanks, writing, “I know one when I see one.”) Most think tanks are based in affluent countries and regions like Canada, the U.S., and Europe, within knowledge-based economies. Of the 1,872 think tanks based in the U.S., a quarter are situated within the sixty-four-mile beltway of DC alone, according to the GGTTI. Ninety percent of US think tanks today were founded since 1950, and half since 1980. Most are headed by males; one recent report claims just 7 of the top 50 think tanks in the US were led by women (Manzano & Sanchez-Giménez, 2019). A Transparify (2014) analysis of the top 21 U.S. think tanks—which includes think tanks with the most expenditures, assets,

and/or employees—found that in 2013 they collectively spent over \$1 billion, had \$2.65 billion in assets, and employed over 7,000 researchers domestically.

Aside from historiographies produced from within, academic study of think tanks has largely been limited to a smattering of books by political scientists on think tanks: Peschek (1987), Smith (1991), Ricci (1993), Stone (1996), Rich (2004), and Abelson (2006). Compared to the voluminous literature on interest groups, the amount of scholarly work on these organizations has been sparse. Rich (2004, p. 7) believes think tanks have largely been ignored by scholars because of their low profile historically and “the biases of social scientists, especially political scientists.” For much of the twentieth century think tanks were seen as remaining above the fray of political conflict (Medvetz 2012). In general, their books and reports were meant neither to be marketing tools nor to make headlines, but rather to “become infused” into the political dialogue (Rich, 2004). Policymakers would use scholars’ research as one of the many tools in their belt, and think tank scholars, ideally, would not publicly debate their research. This invisibility may have contributed to a lack of academic inquiry into their operations. Another possible reason for this neglect is that scholars tend to ignore how their own ideas get translated into policy. As Hall (1989, p. 4) points out, “Any attempt to specify the conditions under which ideas acquire political influence teeters on the brink of reductionism, while the failure to make such an attempt leaves a large lacuna at the center of our understanding of public policy.”

Scholarly study of think tanks is more important than ever. Claims of non-partisanship have become more problematic for modern think tanks; even as certain elite think tanks

have come to dominate the industry. The rise of new media platforms provides think tanks with new means of influencing policymakers via their messaging, even as partisan foundations and other funders have pushed their favored think tanks toward more results-oriented approaches in their research. This proposed research study will help fill in gaps in our knowledge of modern think tanks by examining understudied questions about the intersection of think tank influence, media visibility, and political partisanship.

### **Bias in think-tank research**

John Kingdon's ([1984]/2011) work on policy agendas and policy alternatives provides a useful way to understand how think tanks—in an ideal pluralistic democracy—exert their influence on the policymaking process. According to Kingdon, how policy ideas are articulated and whether they make the political agenda influence policymaking well before any congressional vote. Within such a model, the “relatively hidden” expert plugs away at their scholarly craft in the hope that a crisis or breakthrough opens a “policy window” and inspires politicians to act on issues within their field. In this view, intellectual expression takes on dichotomous forms, like naturalistic or normative, and systematic or impressionistic. Political science is naturalistic, unlike the normative political philosophy (Lasswell H. , 1958, p. 107); think tank analyses are, likewise, concerned with political “conditions” and observations as opposed to “preferences.” And normative expression is replete with terms like “should”, “good”, and “repulsive.”

Many think tanks claim their proposals are independently arrived at and based on objective science. Domain names create some confusion as to the credibility of think tanks such as .com (Peterson Institute), .net (New America), and .org (AEI, Heritage

Foundation, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities), but also those attached to academia like .edu (Brookings, Belfer Center at Harvard). They routinely use terms like “nonpartisan” or “bipartisan” to describe themselves. Consider the current Twitter taglines of leading think tanks: “Bipartisan institution founded in 1962, CSIS is the World’s #1 defense and national security think tank” (Center for Strategic International Studies); “independent research and analysis on the most important policy issues in the world” (Brookings Institution); “private nonprofit nonpartisan research institution devoted to studying international economic policy” (Peterson Institute). These self-descriptions bring to mind the expert on the sideline, diligently and impartially conducting their research on a social problem while they wait for a policy entrepreneur to couple their empirical solution to a viable political platform.

This view, however, neglects the ways that expertise today has been weaponized to support partisan agendas. Indeed, Kavanagh and Rich (2018) attribute the “decay of truth” in modern times, in part, to the excessive partisanship of experts. While one study found that Congress invited mostly neutral think tank experts to testify between 1993 and 1995 (Rich, 2001), some scholars argue that congressional testimonies nowadays are dominated by ideological experts congenial to the agendas of the two major political parties (Bartlett, 2012). Peschek (1987) describes think tanks as “private policy-planning organizations” that should be viewed “not only as objective producers of research and recommendations, but also as active agents linked to power blocs and policy currents.” Stone (2013) highlights the difficulties that think tanks face in supporting principles of academic freedom while being influenced by the biases of their donors; it is “no longer” possible, Stone concludes, “to regard all think tanks as legally independent, scholarly-like,

autonomous free-thinking bodies.” According to this view, think tanks should be studied as fundamentally politicized entities, comparable in their political aims and impacts to explicitly partisan advocacy organizations such as the Koch Network or George Soros’ Open Society network (Fang & Surgey, 2018; Richardson, 2018).

More broadly, scholars have begun in recent years to rigorously question their own ability to provide objective expertise. In 2016, the American Statistical Association released a rare policy statement that essentially conceded that “the ‘scientific method’ of testing hypotheses by statistical analysis stands on a flimsy foundation” (Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016, p. 129). In the influential journal *Nature*, researchers have spoken out about the “limits of conventional statistics” (Nuzzo, 2014) and their concerns about the replicability of scientific findings. The editors of *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* have gone so far as to ban the use of *p*-values in the articles they publish. “Change your statistical philosophy and all-of-a-sudden different things become important,” says Stanford physician and statistician Steve Goodman. “Then ‘laws’ handed down from God are no longer handed down from God. They’re actually handed down to us by ourselves, through the methodology we adopt ... The numbers are where the scientific discussion should start, not end” (as cited in Nuzzo, 2014). In the social sciences, these problems of validity are further complicated by the ability of the subjects of research to respond to that research: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” (Campbell, 1975).

Of course, these concerns do not discredit social science entirely in the pursuit of truth, but they raise questions about the ease with which such science can be exploited to support particular political positions as predators, when principles are needed. Think tanks subject to the pressures of the political landscape risk becoming more predatory in order to attract donors or support prejudices, and more negligent from swift policy windows, pressuring experts to rely on habits and heuristics in the media landscape. They also make the self-presentation that many think tanks still adopt—the nonpartisan expert assessing the given alternatives to empirically determine the most beneficial or least costly policy—seem dangerously naive. That original belief in nonpartisanship, in turn, may have been the outgrowth of a particular—and aberrant—historical moment in the history of think tanks: the liberal consensus of the postwar period.

### **The liberal consensus**

Broadly speaking, there are three eras of think tank history, according to Smith (1991): the foundation era, government contract era, and advocacy era. The precursors to modern think tanks were philanthropic foundations—what Medvetz calls “proto-think tanks”—along the lines of Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford created in the first Gilded Age. During the foundation era, captains of industry followed Carnegie’s “gospel of wealth,” charitably supporting “progressive” — a slippery reference to science-based research and efficiency — research from disinterested experts with the goal of solving social, political, and economic issues (Smith J. A., 1991; Karl & Katz, 1987; Sealander, 1997). The “big three” foundations (Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller) funded the establishment and operations of various research and policy planning organizations whose explicit purpose was to serve



the public interest (Parmar, 2002). Even then, though, ideological advocacy was the norm, Slaughter and Silva (as cited in Karl & Katz, 1987) argue:

*The foundations came to identify ideology manufacture as a major purpose underlying resource deployment, and its production was joined to the pragmatic solution of specific problems... Beyond production, foundations—through professors and other professionals who claimed objectivity and value neutrality in their practice and publications—marketed ideology that justified industrial capital. Professionals were sought out to mediate the idea flow of corporate capital to public in their role as experts, representing no constituency other than science.*

Within this political context of highly concentrated wealth and industry, “a belief in the necessity, if not the desirability, of big business was one of the universal tenets of American thought” (Kolko, 1977). According to a Hamiltonian view of the federal government, bigness was the price to be paid for “maximum industrial efficiency,” and monopoly was an inevitability in the political rationalization of business and industry. Centralized industries led to the purposive centralization of federal power over the economy, ultimately resulting in the development of a regime that Kolko calls “political capitalism,” businesses’ use of “political outlets to attain conditions of stability, predictability, and security” in the economy. The national debate over what form of capitalism should prevail was ultimately settled by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose administration’s Keynesian policies became dominant, and after World War II ideological approaches deemed more radical—communism, socialism, fascism, anti-statism (at the

national level, not global; see Slobodian, 2018)—were largely shunted aside in favor of the liberal democratic safety of the center-left (Bell, 1988; Lipset & Marks, 2000). What followed was a thirty-year “great prosperity” of broadly shared economic growth for the majority of American citizens, according to Robert Reich (founder of the liberal Economic Policy Institute), which, in turn, cemented the liberal political consensus (Ferguson & Rogers, 1986; Mann & Ornstein, 2012; Teles, 2008; Critchlow D. , 2007).

At the close of World War II, the federal government outsourced some of its wartime operations to private experts, thus ushering in the government contract era of think tanks. The RAND Corporation, for instance, was spun off in 1948 from the Douglas Aircraft Company—better known today as Boeing—with additional seed funding from the Ford Foundation (Smith B. L., 1968). Other think tanks founded in this era include the Hudson Institute in 1961, the Institute for Policy Sciences in 1963, and the domestic-oriented Urban Institute in 1968, as well as a group of think tanks focused on the dilemmas of the Cold War—most notably, the Center for Strategic International Studies in 1962 and the Atlantic Council in 1961.

Throughout the post-World War II period, there was broad agreement on society’s goals and the manner through which they should be addressed. The consensus among business and government leaders favored the economic doctrine of Keynesianism and a political ethos of technocratic rationalism. The latter view—a belief that the modern scientific era had brought about the end of ideology—further sidelined theoretical considerations in favor of “decontextualized knowledge,” in which decision-making is, if not value-free, at least value-neutral (Fischer, 2009). With these political winds behind them, a

technostructure of experts steadily amassed power, leading one scholar to say “it is part of the vanity of modern man that he can decide the character of his economic system” (Galbraith, 1967, p. 396). During this time, “the big three” foundations provided considerable support in building liberal knowledge networks and suppressing radical ideologies (Berman, 1983; Parmar, 2002).

Of course, the consensus was not total. Prior to U.S. involvement in World War II, for instance, the Brookings Institution—presently identified as neutral or left-of-center—was a libertarian think tank in today’s parlance, advocating against any sort of welfare-state policy as an undue cost on corporations and the rich (Peschek, 1987; Critchlow D. T., 1985). The American Enterprise Association, though shunned by the big three foundations for its anti-statism, also contested the liberal consensus, wrapping critique in the form of question and analysis, for example: *The Full Employment Bill: An Analysis, Should State Unemployment Insurance Be Federalized?*, and *The National Health Program Scheme: An Analysis of the Wagner-Murray Health Bill*. That said, its leadership implored its scholars to stick to “just the facts” in policy papers, recognizing that the political climate of the time was hostile to anti-liberal economic prescriptions, compelling AEA to add an air of the clandestine to the enterprise (Stahl, 2016).

The liberal consensus began to unravel in the 1970s, as wealthy donors began pushing a form of “managerial conservatism” (Critchlow, 2007). To counter the dominant Keynesian model, they developed an anti-statist agenda inspired by Frederick von Hayek’s economic theories. Hayek’s work appealed to many businesspeople and wealthy individuals, including Charles and David Koch, who began to finance a variety of

neoliberal organizations. For example, the Freedom School, founded by Robert Lefvre in 1957, saw the New Deal as a monumental mistake and promoted revisionist histories in which robber barons figured as heroes; enamored with the organization, Charles Koch became one of its executives and trustees (Mayer, 2016). Meanwhile, the American corporate elite in general fractured considerably, particularly after the Powell Memo, from the pragmatism and relative unity in the post-war years. Under duress, much of the corporate elite shifted to conservatism, resulting in “a model of ineffectuality” at addressing problems in society “since at least the 1980s” (Mizruchi, 2013, p. 285).

The emergence of a new neoliberal institutional infrastructure launched the so-called advocacy age of think tanks (Mirowski, 2013). New corporate and foundation funding—mainly from the Olin, Scaife, and Bradley foundations, in the beginning—allowed for the establishment of both private think tanks and ideological “beachheads” at universities, to ensure the “right” ideas were promoted (Mayer, 2016). These groups began to push a growing list of conservative and free-market policies (Critchlow, 2007; Teles, 2008). Warren Baroody, president of AEI, argued in 1971 that victory over the liberal consensus could only be achieved by “assuring similar resources” to what the other side possessed. AEI’s goal, he added, was to make sure “the American people are exposed to varying points of view on public policy issues” so that “fair competition exists in the arena of idea formation” (Stahl, 2016, p. 54). As these new conservative think tanks gained traction, the established policy shops, wishing to maintain the appearance of being balanced and neutral, increased their conservative personnel as well.

Overall, the history of think tanks suggests that although they have always had ideological agendas, for a time in the postwar period the salience of their partisan differences diminished due to a liberal consensus shared by the major think tanks and funding foundations. In recent years, however, the consensus has fractured—which appears to have had consequences for political polarization among the country’s think tanks, in turn. Such polarization may, then, be related to changes in the sources of funding that think tanks regularly receive and, possibly related, changes in the approach that dominant think tanks take toward their research on policy, creating feedback loops. I discuss each of these trends in turn.

### **Changing revenue sources and tactics to policy**

In a pluralistic democracy, mass-member organizations might fill the necessary role of speaking for public interests on policy issues, but their influence has waned (McGoey, 2015). Likewise, fully publicly-funded think tanks—that is, government research organizations—could conceivably provide less partisan analyses of issues (Blair, 2013), but they have struggled in recent decades, partially as a result of the increasingly corporate-supported Democratic Party drifting to the right, while Republicans have embraced anti-statism (Hacker & Pierson, 2016). For example, congressional members, staffers, and committees could once rely on four support offices: the Congressional Budget Office, Government Accountability Office, Congressional Research Service, and Office of Technology Assessment. All four of these public think tanks provided analysis on interdisciplinary subject matter at the request of Congress, in addition to responding to questions and concerns raised by the general public (Mosher, 1984). However, during the Clinton administration, the federal government was downsized, falling as a percentage of

GDP (Henderson, 2015). The 1995 budget bill gutted the OTA, even though the OTA's neutral approach had won bipartisan praise (Bimber, 1996). The size of the GAO's staff, which was 5,325 in 1992, dropped to 3,975 in 1997 (Bowsher, 1995). Today, conservatives continue to question the need to fund government research organizations. Some Republicans wish to dismantle the CRS, according to an insider from the Reagan and first Bush administrations (Bartlett, 2012), and the Trump administration's director of the Office of Management and Budget, Mick Mulvaney, has stated that the time for the CBO "has come and gone" (Cottle, 2017).

As for private think tanks, domestic foundations are now far from their only sources of funding. Multinational corporations contribute heavily. For example, Liberty Mutual, State Farm, United Health, and Bank of America are major donors to the Brookings Institution and other think tanks, challenging these tax-exempt nonprofits' claims about being publicly-supported. This increasingly puts think tanks in the position of studying aspects of public policy that their major donors have material interests in. At times, controversies have arisen over perceived conflicts of interest. The leaders of prominent think tanks have not done much to assuage such concerns. For example, after firing a staffer known for being critical of the think tank's donors, New America president and CEO Anne-Marie Slaughter provided the following explanation (as cited in Cohen, 2018):

*We're an organization that develops relationships with funders. And you know, these are not just black boxes; they're people. Google is a person, the Ford Foundation—these are people. . . . And particularly when they give you money,*

*which is really a nice thing . . . basic courtesy I think requires—if you know something really bad, you say, “Here’s a heads-up.”*

Concerns have also been raised about the amount of foreign money that domestic think tanks receive (Lipton, Confessore, & Williams, 2016; Silverstein & Williams, 2013). For example, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Norway contributed more than \$3.5 million to the Brookings Institution, according to their annual report in 2016, raising questions about the motivations that these international donors have for funding U.S. policy shops as well as the legitimacy of tax exemptions for organizations possibly representing foreign interests.

These perceived conflicts of interest raise questions about which “public” foreign- and corporate-supported think tanks are really seeking to aid (Freeland, 2012, p. 5). That said, the more common concern raised about today’s think tanks is that they increasingly rely on funding from foundations explicitly devoted to pushing the policy agendas of wealthy individuals or families. From 1985-2001, nine of the wealthiest billionaire family foundations—the Olin, Coors, Scaife, Smith Richardson, Bradley, Earhart, McKenna, JM, and Koch foundations—gave \$1.7 billion in grants, of which \$650 million went to a conservative infrastructure of think tanks, elite journals, legal advocacy groups, and mass-media outlets (Stein, 2008). The focus of these foundations has arguably been on achieving policy outcomes rather than encouraging any deliberative process of policy review (Mayer, 2016; McGoey, 2015; Parmar, 2012). This has incentivized a new, more proactive, and more aggressive approach toward think-tank research: using expertise to

influence policy before congressional votes, rather than providing policy assessments after the fact (Stahl, 2016).

Marketing research before a vote was not a common practice among think tanks until the 1970s, after the Heritage Foundation (seeded by the Scaife and Coors foundations) and AEI (by now funded by the Earhart, Relm, Coors, Scaife, and Lilly foundations) pioneered such tactics. As Warren Baroody, president of the AEI (then called the American Enterprise Association), presciently wrote in 1959 to Harvey Peters: “Circumstances do not make men; it is men who make circumstances” (Stahl, 2016, p. 32). In line with this more results-oriented approach, insurgent think tanks like the Heritage Foundation intentionally moved away from the traditional think tank model of the academic research center. In-depth analysis by scholars was replaced by timely, concise policy briefs often written by journalists, whose output would be held to a “briefcase test”—a report that could fit easily into a congressman’s briefcase and be read in the length of a cab ride (Olasky, 2010; Rogalsky, 2007).

These new approaches have drawn from broader advances in understandings about how to shape policy outcomes. In decision-making bodies, power takes on at least three levels, or faces. The first face is simply the power to make decisions. It involves a transparent dialogue and debate, followed by a decision made in a way that encourages trust (Dahl, 1957). The second face is about determining what policy options are even considered—that is, the agenda. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) use Dahl’s (1961) *Who Governs* as an example in which whole issues are left off the agenda, stating that Dahl “inquires not at all into either the decisions made by the Board of Finance with respect to education nor into



their impact upon the public schools” (p. 951). In politics, policymakers often decide the agenda items behind closed doors, excluding certain issues based on their own preferences. The third face of power involves the bias of the system, which is maintained by individual acts but also by the social structure and cultural pattern of behavior in groups and institutions (Lukes, 1974). The second and third faces of power, for the most part, operate out of the public eye.

The power to keep policies off the agenda can be more important than the decision to vote for or against policy alternatives. Recent research in neuroscience has shown how nudges and “framing”—how policy options are presented—can render human choices irrational (De Martino, Kumaran, Seymour, & Dolan, 2006). With this knowledge, political entrepreneurs have developed new strategies to influence policy outcomes. Today, the legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2017b) argues, choices by policymakers are molded by “choice architects” — e.g. think tank experts — who provide them with educative “nudges” in favor of certain policies; these discreet methods of influencing policymakers play, Sunstein adds, “a large role in American initiatives.”

Of course, nudges toward particular agenda items do not necessarily have to be partisan; in theory, experts can provide a clear understanding of a given problem and a careful assessment of a policy’s merits based on solid objective evidence (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Expert judgment is increasingly helpful (Muller, 2018) as specialized knowledge becomes more essential in understanding complex bureaucracies and processes (Weiss, 1992). At the same time, without equal access and sufficient political and economic resources, educative nudges favor those who possess the substantial networks and

resources that enable them to nudge harder than others (Proctor, 1991, p. 38). In this way, policy agendas can be decisively shaped by the expert “alternatives” provided by well-resourced think tanks, which in turn hire only “elite” scholars with the “right” critiques. This is the nightmare scenario for democracy that critics like Bachrach and Baratz (1962) warn against. If the agenda is controlled by forces other than the typical voter, they argue, then citizen influence over legislators is ultimately of little importance. The policies that are given consideration by both parties will favor elite and interest group policy preferences over those of the majority (Gilens & Page, 2014).

A related concern is that the think tank industry has itself come to be dominated by a group of major players. It is true that with few barriers to entry into the think-tank marketplace of ideas, the number of such organizations has grown dramatically, with over 1,800 think tanks in the U.S. alone. At the same time, the industry has become much more consolidated. In 1995-6, a tally of the budgets of 200 nationally focused think tanks came to a total of \$523 million, or \$876 million in 2018 dollars (Rich, 2004). In 2013, the top ten think tanks showed expenditures totaling \$780 million, or \$853 million in 2018 dollars (Transparify, 2014). In other words, ten think tanks now have nearly the budget that 200 did in 1995, indicating either the sheer growth or concentration within the industry. In addition, research finds that think tanks that are geographically close to politicians (that is, Washington-based) and “not part of the ‘liberal cluster’” (such as EPI, IPS, and CBPP) have major advantages in obtaining funding from foundations, corporations, and both foreign and domestic governments, the dominant financiers of think tanks; according to Rich and Weaver (2000), “the budget of the entire ‘liberal cluster’ of think tanks is slightly less than that of the Heritage Foundation alone” (p.99).

## **Mediated experts in a backsliding democracy**

In pursuing these results-oriented strategies, modern think tanks are also responding to larger shifts in the political and media landscape. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), the “guardrails of American democracy are weakening” due to the erosion of democratic norms. Since the 1980s and particularly in the new century, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, the major parties have come to see their opponents less as legitimate rivals and more as implacable enemies. Both parties now use whatever political control they achieve to maximize partisan advantage, encouraging “fight to the death” and “scorched earth” approaches to politics that are supposed to be the hallmarks of faltering or failed states (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Buquicchio, 2017; Ash, 2017). As congressional norms have deteriorated and partisanship has increased, a “vetocracy” has taken hold, with political actors exploiting the system’s multiple veto points to stall the passage of any undesired policies (Fukuyama, 2014).

Furthermore, developments in the structure of mass media have incentivized a more partisan style among think tanks. Today, 93 percent of Americans get their news online, and two-thirds of Americans use social media for news (Lynn, 2018). Sunstein (2017a) has argued that with the advent of social media, a “daily me” is being concocted, as citizens increasingly seek their news through platforms that allow them to control—and thereby narrow—their choice of outlets to digest (though the choice here, too, is heavily influenced, often unknowingly, by the platform’s algorithm). This “self-selection” problem in media consumption is well-documented (Stroud, 2011). As a result, “general-interest

intermediaries” that prevailed in the past, like ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcasts in national news, have steadily given way to “specific-interest intermediaries” that heighten group polarization. In social media, a lack of dissenting voices coupled with confirmation bias produce “cybercascades” in which ideological convictions determine expert judgments on questions of fact (Sunstein, 2017a). Partisan voices on cable networks like MSNBC and Fox may still have significantly less viewership than their mainstream cousins, but they receive significantly more discussion in print and other outlets for their extreme claims, particularly high-profile conservatives like Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity (Taylor, 2017). Such echo chambers prevent a shared foundation of mutual toleration and forbearance, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue (2018).

This partisan media landscape has given result-oriented think tanks new channels through which to promote their ideas to uncritical audiences, at times sacrificing more rigorous analysis for negligent. Think tanks like the Center for American Progress cater directly to journalists, as exemplified by title of the organization’s 2005 progress report: “We Do The Research So Reporters Don’t Have To.” Heritage has created a radio studio and Brookings has installed an \$800,000 television studio (Medvetz, 2012). Journalistic outreach includes newer technologies as well: from podcasts like Slate and New America’s *The Good Fight with Yascha Mounk* to an array of Twitter accounts for each think tank (Brookings, for instance, has handles specific to audience interests, like @BrookingsInst, @BrookingsFP, @BrookingsEcon, @BrookingsGlobal, and @BrookingsGov).

Targeting partisan news outlets and using social media platforms provide think tanks with at least two benefits. One is an indirect approach to influencing policymakers—

influencing the views of the voters who decide whether they stay in office. Limited funding and an explosion of information have forced think tanks to adapt in the face of competition from “advocacy” groups for “the attention of busy policymakers and an increasingly distracted public” (McGann, 2015). The agenda-setting function of mass media not only tells the public “what to think about,” but “how to think about” it (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002). Politicians are particularly vulnerable to such media lobbying; as McCombs (2004) notes, “there is considerable evidence that the shifting salience of issues on the media agenda often are the basis for public opinion about the overall performance in office of a public leader.” Another benefit of media engagement is the connections it facilitates to potential investors, particularly elite investors looking for “win-win” projects (Giridharadas, 2018).

Today’s journalists and think tank researchers share a symbiotic relationship, with each benefitting from the other. Journalists seek out ideas and validation for their reporting while scholars seek readership to increase name recognition and idea dissemination. That said, the rise of social media platforms has meant that think tanks and their researchers are also able nowadays to market their research and ideas by themselves (Shirky, 2008), contributing to the ongoing decline of establishment news outlets, which have generally had less success than their more partisan, niche counterparts in sustaining their audiences over recent decades (Bagdikian, 2004).

In theory, fragmentation in the media landscape should democratize the provision of policy advice by giving independent experts new outlets for their views. Indeed, some scholars see the proliferation of “mom-and-pop” think tanks as a challenge to traditions of

peer-reviewed scholarship in both universities and establishment think tanks (McGann, 2016). According to this perspective, universities and establishment think tanks are now competing with more or less unaffiliated intellectual entrepreneurs to provide the public and politicians with independent information and analysis in a pluralistic political environment. The growing demand for specialized information has led to growth in the supply of expertise (Bertelli & Wenger, 2009). On the other hand, greater competition within the mass media may mean that resources, credibility, and recognition from policymakers are all the more important in standing out among the multitude of voices. Even if mom-and-pop policy shops can act quickly and make themselves useful to other political actors, including social movements, they lack such advantages. Elite think tanks have, for example, the resources to nurture national and global networks with other NGOs, IGOs, and think tanks. In this view, it has become increasingly important to be a member of an elite think tank in order to be influential.

While success is difficult to gauge, a strong presence in the media is indicative of a thriving think tank operation. A study of interest groups by Cigler and Loomis (1995) notes that think tanks purposefully seek to “greatly expand their visibility in the national media.” Indeed, many think tanks include publications and appearances in major media as a metric of their success in annual reports and other public statements (Rich, 2004).

In an eight-year survey of media citations and think tanks beginning in 1997, a trend is unmistakable: there are more and more citations over time, in part, because general-interest news wishes to provide two conflicting perspectives (Trimpath, 2005). With the appearance of an even-handed debate, newspapers are able to claim indifference and,

therefore, neutrality. The use of online platforms can allow think tanks to avoid relying on the media as gatekeepers to public audiences; nevertheless, research by Johnson and Kaye (2015) finds that the public deemed political news from major television networks (excluding FOX) as more credible than social media outlets. Furthermore, among popular rankings of Canadian think tanks, think tank visibility online does not correlate with perceived reliability, suggesting that the use of new online marketing strategies may not lead to increased influence or credibility (McNutt & Marchildon, 2009). On one hand, some think tanks have the resources to execute a more thoughtful and sustained public outreach component. On the other hand, many think tanks curtail such efforts to avoid the appearance of impartiality.

Does media visibility translate into policy influence? Research by Rich and Weaver (2000) and Rich (2004) finds that increased visibility is correlated with an increased likelihood that a think tank's personnel will be called to Congress to testify. Most citations came from think tanks with no identifiable ideology (55%), while conservative think tanks were cited nearly as often (39%) and liberal, the least (6%) (Rich, 2004). With regards to congressional testimony from think tanks, however, conservative representatives appeared twelve times more frequently than liberal, and those with no identifiable ideology appeared ten times more frequently than liberal. The results of his analysis show that conservative, market-oriented think tanks were the most successful at conveying their ideas to Congress twenty years ago.

On the other hand, a study by Abelson (2006), which tracked U.S. congressional testimonies from 2001-2006 in the Armed Services, Intelligence, and Foreign Relations

committees, found no significant relationship between high visibility in the mainstream media and appearances before congressional committees—for example, the Senate Committee on Armed Services during this time period relied more heavily on the CSIS (49% of appearances) than on think tanks that were much more cited in the media, such as AEI, RAND, and the Cato Institute. In another study, Abelson (2002) also found that the most visible Canadian think tanks were not more likely to have consultations with governmental departments. High media visibility is not a “precondition” to advising senior public servants in departmental consultations, he concluded, but is strongly correlated with parliamentary testimony.

## **Research problem**

With the reduced government role in supporting public think tanks, those able to “help government think” are increasingly private organizations that are located within the beltway. These think tanks are vulnerable to conflicts of interest due to their sources of funding, face pressures to market research in a partisan and results-oriented — rather than enlightened debate toward social welfare — fashion, and focus on gaining public and political attention through media visibility. This proposed study will assess how successful think tanks have adapted to this new political economy. As Medvetz (2012) argues, think tanks occupy an interstitial field of media, business, academic, and government spaces; how exactly do the most influential think tanks navigate these spaces, and to what extent are they more focused on their relationships with the mass media and partisan political interests? Rich and Weaver (2000) and Abelson (2002) find that legislators, staffers, and bureaucrats often point to the most visible think tanks in the media as the most



influential, and their assessments of the direct influence through overall frequency of congressional testimonies reinforce such claims. However, these studies were conducted when the media landscape was dramatically different. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have transformed communication, and the media industry is still very much in flux. With the advent of many-to-many communication provided by social media, the established media gatekeepers are unable to filter the spread of populist ideas, both the liberal (Occupy movement and Black Lives Matter) and the conservative (Tea party movement and Trump). The resultant political partisanship in media contributes to the lack of mutual toleration and forbearance in Congress. My contribution to the literature aims to understand how these new media sources relate to think tanks visibility and partisanship in main stream media, and whether this evolving landscape is translating to influence in Congress.

I will use publicly accessible tax, media, and congressional data in my approach to study the extent to which media visibility and political partisanship explain the degree of influence modern think tanks have on policy outcomes. First, I identify which think tanks have the most authority in Congress, as measured by interactions with policymakers—namely, invitations to testify at congressional committees (Abelson, 2002; Rich & Weaver, 2000). I then use multiple regression analysis to assess to what extent these measures of influence are associated with think-tank media exposure (as measured by mentions in major news sources and social media metrics) and political partisanship, adapting the methodologies of Rich and Weaver (2000) to measure the former and Groseclose and Milyo (2005) to measure the latter by converting DW-Nominate scores from the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress.

More specifically, I plan to determine which are the most frequent think tanks to appear before congressional committees, the relationship of that authority to policy influence, the extent to which media visibility is associated with congressional appearances as well as with political partisanship, and finally the extent to which political partisanship is associated with congressional appearances.

## **Ch 2: The Influence of Think Tanks: a movement in expertise**

This chapter will review the emergence of think tanks in the Foundation era through the consensus period to their more recent explosive growth near the turn of the century.

With a scant handful of policy shops stumbling in the inter-war period, over 6000 think tanks worldwide have been founded, more than half since 1980, and only fourteen percent of the top 50 US think tanks are led by women. This boom in think tanks ushers in the Advocacy era, distinguishing it from a time before intellectual bias was as visible or on display in 24-hour news cycles and social media. However, neither in the Foundation era nor Government contract era were think tanks advocacy-free or entirely unbiased. Experts aimed at depoliticizing government, and the suppression of widespread political bias in science aided the massive expansion of government. But it is also true that tactics changed after the government contract era and elite intellectuals struggled to reach consensus over basic aims, simultaneously blurring the line between politically disinterested intellectuals and non-intellectuals (hired guns in intellectual warfare) in a struggle over expertise. Divergent think tanks are logical outgrowths of the reorientation of America's elite (Ricci, 1993). The policies of think tanks take time to

materialize and rise on the agenda, therefore it is important to understand their political origins and how they attempt sway policy makers.

## **Political emergence and polarizing growth**

From the first congressional investigation of foundations, criticism can be traced throughout the remaining century from both the radical right, as vehicles for liberal social policies, and the radical left that saw the “big three” as embodiment of the establishment, but the important point to be made is that these institutions had complex objectives from the beginning that are certainly not value-free (Berman, 1983; Parmar, 2012).

The great philanthropic foundations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were chartered with the overt purpose to improve public welfare with eminent educators and publicly spirited citizens. These “proto-think tanks” were of the social elite, and sought to build a technocratic consensus through cooperating horizontally across other elites (Medvetz, 2012). The first Gilded Age is well known for its industrial monopolies and unprecedented concentrations of wealth. However, Collier and Horowitz (1976) argue, creating a “technology of power” is the long-lasting contribution of John D. Rockefeller, organizing systems of networked power — an example is the creation of dynastic corporate trusts. One scholar now argues “American law grants more rights to the dead than any other country in the world” (Madoff, 2010). The proto-think tanks act as another technology of power, shielded from taxes so long as they were adherent to political neutrality and avoided propaganda. Such neutral claims are, however, belied by

an ephemeral understanding of public policy (the Brookings-Brownlow feud is illustrative).

At the same time, the first public research organizations were formalized with the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921. With considerable outside support from director W. Willoughby of the Institute for Governmental Research (a precursor to the Brookings Institution) and a public desire to fix what Mosher (1984, pp. 16-20) calls a centralized, duplicitous, and dictatorial federal financial system, the bill to make government more efficient was signed by President Harding. The powers and responsibilities of the General Accounting Office (now known as the Government Accountability Office) in the Department of Treasury were transferred uniformly to a wholly new congressional agency with the same name, and the Bureau of the Budget was created in the Executive (now known as the Office of Management and Budget), both sharing similar goals of “economy” and “efficiency” in government where extensive corruption and waste from “political machines” was suspected.<sup>1</sup>

Within a few decades, joining the foundations would be government’s strong hand at addressing socio-economic problems, giving rise to the liberal consensus period of the Government contract era (Smith J. A., 1991). As the post-war liberal consensus wanes under elite conflict and the State endorses financialization of the economy, the liberal consensus of the Government contract era is dismantled, in no small part by the

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<sup>1</sup> The GAO was “given independent powers for which it accounts only to the deity and most of which it seldom exercises” (Mosher, 1984), in other words to the Comptroller, approved by Congress, for fifteen years.

advocacy and flourishing of new right wing think tanks, providing counterrevolutionary ideas, simultaneously repoliticizing the seemingly “depoliticized” expert. In response to the turbulent 1970s, the merchant elite organize around conservatism, funding a movement spearheaded in new think tanks with new leaders and tactics to influence policy makers and the public. This section explains how think tanks emerged as political objects while some have grown into commodified, ascientific, and manipulative propaganda.

### **Private wealth and social discontents**

Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth* gave purpose to the boundless resources few but the robber barons possessed (Josephson, 1934). Carnegie thought it immoral to die with such surplus and it should be directed toward the betterment of one’s community and more, that estate taxes were necessary, indeed, the “wisest” of taxes. His own directive for charity included universities, medical institutions, public parks, concert halls, churches, and more than 3,000 libraries (Madoff, 2010). The efforts of Rockefeller Foundation (1913) and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP/1910), to some, like Ida Tarbell and Henry Demarest Lloyd, were little more than alms for the poor in an attempt to rebrand themselves for their exploitation of labor. What can be said is that the blend of noble efforts, a robber baron’s drive for success yet directed at assuaging the ills of robber baron society, succeeded in sustaining private wealth and its social discontents, shaping the treatments to those problems in ways that stray from threatening the very system that produces them (McGoey, 2015; Parmar, 2012). The

Commission on Industrial Relations otherwise known as the Walsh Commission of 1916 is helpful in understanding these origins.

Samuel Untermyer, best known as lead counsel in the Pujo Commission to investigate the “money trust” of the House of Morgan, discusses the formation of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Charter after its unfulfilled application in Washington D.C. to Congress. The New York State legislature, which granted the charter, was not overly important, “if New York had not given them what they wanted they would have passed along from State to State until they found a corporate habitation on their own terms, without in the least interfering with their operating wherever they chose. This ought not to be possible.” However, foundations were not without their incredible strengths according to Untermyer, and had potential for tremendous good only if structured differently, namely denied “perpetual charters,” “be limited in size” and “not be permitted to accumulate income” (Walsh, 1916).

Basil Manly, director of research for the Walsh Commission, lamented the concentration of tax-free resources controlled by few hands in America’s Gilded Age:

*The funds of these foundations are exempt from taxation, yet during the life of their founders are subject to their dictation for any purpose other than commercial profit. In the case of the Rockefeller group of foundations, the absolute control of the funds and of the activities of the institutions now and in perpetuity rests with Mr. Rockefeller, his son, and whomsoever they may appoint as their successors. The control of these funds has been widely published*

*as being in the hands of eminent educators and publicly spirited citizens. In the case of the Rockefeller foundations, however, the majority of the trustees are salaried employees of Mr. Rockefeller or the foundations, who are subject to personal dictation and may be removed at any moment.*

At the christening of the Rockefeller Foundation, “Universality and Deathlessness” are the opening words spoken by Frederick T. Gates, Rockefeller’s chief philanthropic advisor, proclaiming the limits to the foundation’s interests have been removed (Fosdick, 1952). The prophecy to last in perpetuity free from public oversight is validated by today’s presence of the big three (Ford was reluctant at first). However, it is Gates’ twin concepts of “universality and deathlessness” that Louis Brandeis, a prominent corporate lawyer, professor, and justice of the Supreme Court, seems to have in mind when he compared large foundations to their relationship with corporate power and the forces they command “from all parts of the country”, forces which can be used “in any conflict to carry out what they deem to be their business principle, and can also afford to suffer losses.” Brandeis is prescient and worth quoting at length (Walsh, 1916):

*The result in the cases of these large corporations, may be to develop a benevolent absolutism, but it is an absolutism all the same; and it is that which makes the great corporation so dangerous. There develops within the State a state so powerful that the ordinary social and industrial forces existing are insufficient to cope with it.*

Against such claims, Rockefeller reminds the committee during one of his days bearing witness that “these foundations, as is true of all modern corporations, are subject to the reserved power of legislative bodies which created them—to modify and appeal their charters whenever the public interests require.” But Rockefeller was clear on another; he wished for voluntary, not mandatory, fiscal reports to government, preferring no interference at all.

The Walsh Commission resolved in disagreement, given the purposefully conflicted makeup of its personnel—joint representatives from labor and business—and appended supplemental reports to the main document by director Manly. The report, nevertheless, concluded “it would be desirable to recommend their abolition.” Otherwise, these institutions required government oversight and investigation, transparency, limited funds, caps on accumulation, and a final requirement for Government’s own investment in education and social programs. Without competition, he asserted, the dominant men of industry “rapidly extended to control the education and ‘social service’ of the nation” (Walsh, 1916, p. 81). Commons and Harriman, commissioners from the business sector, recommended to delay action, continue investigation by Congress, and, importantly, there should be no subsidization by government to foundations nor foundations to governments in their supplemental report. Government should consider foundations as competitors. In this view, foundations are considered (nearly) equal institutions with concentrated wealth, charitably directed to whatever cause in perpetuity.

At the heart of the burgeoning think tank industry are the neutral claims of eminent educators and publicly spirited citizens. The tax-exempt status forbids them from



supporting political causes or engaging in propaganda. However, clear objectives with political implications can be made out from the beginning: a state charter to address any and all projects in the name of welfare while free from taxation and public oversight, the ability to profit, and exist in perpetuity at an unlimited size. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for example, ran right up to the line of political activity early, attracting attention from Congress when it published and disseminated 700,000 copies of an article written by Elihu Root, president of CEIP *and* Sen. of New York, on eliminating an exemption for American vessels paying the taxes to foreign countries for use of the Panama canal, prompting one senator to ask of the CEIP secretary in front of the Senate Lobby Committee, “what has it [a peace organization] to do with Panama Canal tolls?” No legal actions were taken potentially regarding CEIP as a lobby (Medvetz, 2012).

It was the belief that a national government, like nationalized industries, could benefit from the tools and resources that made war and industry successful. Congress needed such technocratic assistance and the War Industries Board embodied it. Afterwards, a standing think tank for business and war planning was formed by leaders of finance and industry, the Council on Foreign Relations (1921) (Shoup & Minter, 1977). And there were other proto-think tanks like the National Bureau for Economic Research (1920) and the Twentieth Century Fund (1919) which is now The Century Foundation, but it would not be until the Great Depression that the government would try its hand addressing wide-spread societal issues. By then, government largely followed the systems designed, tested, and promoted by private philanthropy. According to Karl (1976, p. 132) “private philanthropy was not competing with a publicly supported

federal system. It was, however, providing a method of social planning, and it would be sixty years before the federal government would move into active, overwhelming competition.” The competition called for by Commons and Harriman in the Walsh investigation would be late-coming.

### **Brookings v. Brownlow**

Taylorism was expanding from its success in business to social planning, and likewise technocratic solutions were sought for social projects, including making government more ‘efficient.’ After successful central planning in the War Industries Board, Robert S. Brookings was adamant that much more could be done with scientific observation and economic planning. Thus, he led fundraising efforts for the Institute for Governmental Research in 1916 (IGR), the Institute of Economics in 1922, and a Graduate School in 1922 which would all merge as one and absorb the school, becoming Brookings Institution in 1927 (Critchlow D. T., 1985). The historian Alasdair Roberts (1995) provides an exceptional account of the “Brownlow-Brookings Feud” in the late 1930s over government reorganization in which Louis Brownlow states “the reputation of government research... for scientific impartiality is at stake.” The academics were careful not to overly politicize the reorganization task, even if conflict could not be avoided as the Rockefeller Foundation had hoped.

During a second major economic recession, FDR attempted to restructure the executive office — as well as the Supreme Court — in order to circumnavigate conservative opposition. This led to his creation of the Brownlow Commission, after advisement in the form of a letter from Charles Merriam. The Commission would be comprised of

experts Luther Gulick, Charles Merriam, and Louis Brownlow, who were tasked with developing their own ideas on the reorganization of government, to which they largely agreed a strong executive branch should lead a nation-sized public administration (Fry & Raadschedlers, 2008). But reorganization had been central to Brookings from its birth. Indeed, the IGR — a precursor to Brookings — ushered in the Bureau of the Budget in 1921, guiding policy makers through its passage and sharing office space with the new organization until accommodations could be acquired. Sen. Harry Byrd, a conservative Democrat from Virginia and chair of the Select Committee on Government Organization, tapped Brookings with a \$20,000 proposition to develop their plan for reorganization in tandem, to which Harold Moulton, president of Brookings, felt it a metaphysical “moral obligation” to accept (Critchlow D. T., 1985). Moulton, known for his dismal take on the New Deal, aligned Brookings with anti-statist business interests and conservatives.

Sen. Byrd’s Select Committee was overtly concerned about changes in the executive that might create redundancies or conflict with other agencies and whether or not they be abolished or better coordinated. Covertly, the concern was with the strengthening of executive power. Over time, the Brookings charge would divulge from the appropriate method of reorganization to “question as to whether or not the President be given all or any part of the powers his committee recommended” (Select Committee on Government Organization, 1937). However, the underlying concern from all three parties was that the burgeoning new crop of public administrators would be threatened by a public fight, undermining the façade of neutrality and likewise the forming public administration community itself (Roberts, 1995).

The pending bout alarmed intellectuals and the claim that a technocratic solution to government organization could not be disagreed upon. A depoliticized technocrat would reach the *right* solution, provided the purpose was the same. This fear in the 1930s could not be understated, according to Roberts (1995). Recall the Friedrich-Finer debate of the late-depression era in academia, for example, pitting the propriety of “responsibility” versus “accountability” among public administrators in a democratic society (Jackson, 2009; Plant, 2011).

An important difference from the Friedrich-Finer debate is that Brookings and Brownlow kept much of their correspondence and data confidential for fear of stoking a political fire in the media and simultaneously undermining their efforts to depoliticize a public administration. Moreover, in a meeting with Sen. Byrd, representatives from Brookings and Louis Brownlow agreed to limit “ourselves rigidly to avoid the field of policy.” In another meeting it was suggested that Brookings go so far as follow Brownlow’s findings regarding fiscal administration; they declined. After Brookings learned of the Administrative preliminary report to place more of the budget under the executive branch, their cooperation ended. Drafts of reports to Brookings were stopped after it was believed Congress was getting copies and leaking them to press, weeks ahead of the 1936 election. Upon attempts to reconcile, division further ensued leading Moulton to call Brownlow’s proposal “non-American”, without yet seeing the report. Brownlow would schedule the final report to be completed after the election to avoid the agenda setting effect it would have. Moreover, Rockefeller was preparing to mediate the debate between the groups in secrecy in order to avoid the appearance of political

activity in any of its recipient organizations, like Brookings, the Social Science Research Council (Brownlow and Merriam), and the Institute of Public Administration (Gulick). In this instance, transparency was avoided in order to shield the public from the politicized and epistemological nature of public administration, in paradoxical hopes of sustaining reverence to experts without “open, reasoned divergence on matters of public importance”, creating an asymmetry of information between the public and publicly-spirited citizens.

The conclusions that Brookings had made put the Board in a bind, not only because the loss of Robert S. Brookings created a vacancy that was filled by none other than Frederic Delano, uncle to the President, but also its clear opposition to the President’s committee gave fuel to Roosevelt’s Republican opponents and the media, like the Hearst press machine which labelled the proposition the “dictator bill.” As “embarrassing” as it was to be chairman of an institution victimized from media onslaught, Delano resigned, stating “it is impossible to expect an institution which has to raise funds to be liberal” (as cited in Critchlow, 1985, p.135). In addition, Moulton accused Delano of assisting their rivals in the Brownlow Commission. The Board would support Moulton and his continued rhetoric to party indifference and Delano would be replaced quickly with Dwight F. Davis, President Harding’s secretary of War. Brookings’ report may have been adversarial but it is not the sole reason some of Brownlow’s proposals failed. Some were successful. Acting Director of the BoB in 1938, Daniel Bell, recommended realignment of the executive office following the Brownlow report, to which his successor in 1939 would implement (Mosher, 1984). And Brookings would also continue to post anti-

Roosevelt members to the board, including a young Dean Acheson, Roosevelt's first undersecretary to the Treasury that was forced to resign over policy opposition.

Brookings became alienated from the charitable trusts. The foundations wished to support organizations that contributed to government, and Brookings support was "negligible." In 1942, the operating expenses fell by nearly a third from the previous year to \$312,000 (Saunders, 1966). Moulton's continued disbelief in Keynesian economics, however, would find some support from businessmen and conservative economists. Edwin Gay, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Business would aid Moulton, for example, as well as letters from "bankers, stockbrokers, engineers, and corporate executives" offering support to "keep up the fight" (Critchlow D. T., 1985, p. 141).

Other partisan positions would follow at Brookings, including general opposition of New Deal policies, Sen. Wagner's Full Employment Act (which they considered totalitarian and a gateway to the end of private enterprise), and Truman's Fair Deal attempt at universal health care. Any of these economic bills would increase the federal government and its bureaucratic capacity as well as potential distance from a balanced budget. Albeit, Truman's generous slash of the budget from \$91 billion in the first quarter of 1945 to \$24.5 billion by mid-1947 belies such claims against balancing. Meanwhile, policies that increased subsidization for military expenditures would not merit the same cost-benefit conclusions as the Cold War approached. A bombs-not-jobs approach could be claimed as Brookings' reports began to advocate reducing expenditures when applied to social programs and endorsed those in matters of war. Moulton went so far as to write Thomas Dewey, presidential rival to Truman,

recommending General MacArthur to the rebranded cabinet post of Secretary of Defense though he admittedly did not know the general personally but “the dictatorial qualities ascribed to him would be assets in this particular situation” (Critchlow D. T., 1985, p. 163). Moulton was fully aware of his obvious trespass onto partisan politics involving himself in Dewey’s campaign but as to why could only be guessed at, Critchlow suspects mounting anxiety of an impending military defeat. With Moulton’s retirement, Brookings financial status is resurrected when, former director of the General Education Fund for the Rockefeller Foundation, Robert Calkins becomes president in 1952, bringing the name of Brookings into the fold of the liberal consensus.

In an optimistic view, the eagerness to display a disinterested and detached expert greased the wheels of the public ability to accept a growing federal government that could meet the needs of national problems. In a more critical view, the need for a disinterested expert was defensive, believing the public incapable of settling with the ubiquity of politics. Even the Rockefeller Foundation became alert to the Brownlow-Brookings feud though it had no interest in either report concerning the GAO; Rockefeller Foundations did however contribute to think tanks and a crack in the veneration of disinterested policy experts might understandably spread upward to the proto-think tanks themselves. In retrospect, Roberts argues, the disagreements amounted to responsible differences concerning the New Deal through discussions around terms like “efficiency” and “scientific principle.”

From their inception in the foundation era, think tanks were highly aware of the politicized nature of technocratic solutions and their “demonstration of neutrality.”

Brookings clearly was party to and part of debates concerning the proper role of experts in policy making and, at times, genuinely attempting to help government think. The upcoming war would force government's hand if it was to compete with Germany. In 1940, the U.S. government spent less than \$100 million on research and development, mostly on agriculture and military projects (Smith J. A., 1991). By 1945, however, government investment reached \$1.5 billion, and economists began to portend that the resolution of the war would risk a return to economic slippage. Thus, a new research organization was created, the Committee of Economic Development (CED) with a hope of maintaining low unemployment through continued government assistance. Alongside the influential CED, government investment in think tanks brought about the RAND Corporation in 1946, the Foreign Policy Research Institute in 1955, the Atlantic Council in 1961, the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 1962, and the Urban Institute in 1968.

### **Dismantling the consensus through crises**

Experts wishing to avoid the liberal consensus, feeling shunned by the intellectual elites, often crossed the Atlantic (Mirowski, 2013). The Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS/1947), founded by members of the International Chamber of Commerce and Frederick Hayek, served as a retreat for academics quite literally and fostered what would later be an important intellectual outlet for market fundamentalism. In Switzerland, the Geneva school of neoliberal economics founded economic theory in support of international economic law, a global economic infrastructure (Slobodian, 2018).



Others were tapped to redefine the vital center as a safe alternative to the far-right and left wings of the political spectrum. Hofstadter, for example, was contracted by the Twentieth Century Fund (TCF), a think tank led by Adolf Berle, and the Ford Foundation to convince Americans slowly that the robber barons had never existed. Rather, the populists against monopoly power of the past were somewhat mentally ill, paranoid, and likely “nascent fascists” (Stoller, 2019). This was true for the popular economist of the time, John Kenneth Galbraith, also hired by TCF for similar reasons, when he claimed that big buyers would create big sellers inevitably — like big business created big labor — as a “countervailing power”, dismissing the sanguinary battles of class conflict. Instead, Galbraith (1967, p. 104) states that democratic socialism, like capitalism, has lost its power to the “technostructure”: “Like promises to enforce the antitrust laws in the United States, [democratic socialism] is no longer a political program but an overture to nostalgia.” Though Stoller points to C. Wright Mills’ as a part of the consensus narrative, Mills was quite clear that the balance of power was a narrow focus. “In and out of universities,” Mills writes, the attention of analysts “to middle levels of power obscures the structure of power as a whole,” (Mills, 1956, p. 245). Moreover, Mills more radical works were not in favor. In an interview with David Eakins, Mills proposal to the Ford Foundation to produce a new study entitled the “the cultural apparatus” was rejected (Berman, 1983, p. 31). The Ford Foundation, it was learned, had no intention of supporting what likely would become “another *Power Elite*.” At the same time the C.I.A., a rather controversial donor to the Ford Foundation, labeled Mills one of the most influential New Left intellectuals, six years after his death (Summers, 2008). The vital center appreciated big business and the rising crop of chain stores, so long as they partnered with big government.

Major domestic policies from Republican Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford throughout the consensus exhibit political moderation. Eisenhower enacted a tax on war profits during the Korean War and increased social security and farm subsidies. Nixon proposed a sweeping universal health care program which would be embroiled as would most of his policies with Watergate but not before the institution of the EPA and OSHA. Lastly, Ford under mounting political and economic pressure proposed the “WIN” plan including public service jobs and a tax cut on the bottom half of society balanced with revenue from increased oil taxes (Mizruchi, 2013).

Not only were political and academic elites in consensus, the liberal consensus benefitted from moderates at the helms of businesses. Businesses were loosely organized around a “moderate consensus” for public policy, led by the CED and CFR, argues Mizruchi (2013). The political center, labeled liberal by some and moderate by others, shared an unprecedented uniformity, a shared belief in “enlightened self-interest” *and* government involvement in order to account for corporate free-riders.

At the time, businesses were not burdened on a competitive international level, dual government projects of social welfare and Vietnam had not yet drained resources, Watergate lay ahead as did the oil shock of the ‘70s, and economic inflation with unemployment that would defy Keynesian economics had not yet dismantled the liberal consensus, ultimately giving rise to the conservative Advocacy era (Mizruchi, 2013) (Smith J. A., 1991). Even the liberal Trilateral Commission, founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller and Zbigniew Brzezinski, would issue a report that democracy itself is in

crisis from widespread university education, mass media, and professionals challenging the traditional means of social control, therefore democracy should be reduced in order to be saved from itself (Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975, pp. 7-8).

Krippner (2011) argues social, fiscal, and legitimation crises were met in particular by one industry in the U.S., the financial services industry, that guided and navigated the U.S. through these pressures of the 1960s and '70s. The Ford Motor Company, for example, has become more profitable selling loans to purchase cars rather than the actual sale of them. The State, likewise, sought a “solution” in finance, which is portrayed in three policy shifts: incrementally more permissive regulation of the 1970’s and ‘80s, reliance on foreign capital inflows after 1980, and the Volcker Shock of October 1979. The result of these policy shifts, unintended by policymakers at the time, transformed the U.S. economy and inverted “the public household” Daniel Bell (1976) had hoped for and rebuilt it in “the shadowy realms of the market” (Krippner, 2011, pp. 21-22). Policymakers, then, “capitalize on crisis” by using “domestic and global capital markets to resolve domestic political dilemmas”, in part by avoiding “difficult decisions about how to allocate limited resources between competing social priorities”, setting the stage for the “financialization” of the U.S. economy.

While these pressures mounted, so did the larger business community coalesce in its decision to side with the conservative fringe and answer Lewis Powell’s call to arms.<sup>2</sup> In the world of think tanks, the long-standing, free-market conservative AEI was

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<sup>2</sup> The conservative fringe is embodied by today’s Freedom Caucus, yesterday’s Tea Party, and yesteryear’s Barry Goldwater.

generously tapped, likewise the newly formed Heritage Foundation and Koch-seeded Cato Institute to lead the counterrevolution. These three on the right and the Institute for Policy Studies on the left are a few of the advocacy think tanks about to enter the agenda setting process. Just as government investment in social programs had finally come to match and exceed that of the big three foundations, think tanks deploy more aggressive tactics and attract new funding sources, creating a boon for think tanks willing to deviate from the liberal consensus and Government contract era, or for true believers in a return to a pre-Keynesian political-economy. This outgrowth of think tanks is not unrelated to the conservative movement. A counterrevolution makes its start most clearly in the 1970s (Hollis-Brusky, 2015) and most notably in the Heritage Foundation and AEI as the vehicles for new ideas (Stahl, 2016).

### **A counter-revolution in law**

The success of the liberal consensus in government and moderate consensus in business could not outweigh the crises of the 1970s. The moderate consensus dissolves under the pressure while think tanks become more results-oriented in attempts to commoditize science, foreign governments begin their steady presence in U.S. think tanks, and new charitable trusts arise or dynastic trusts pass down to heirs with new directions for social planning.

While the `70s experience a multi-round bout between political and economic crises, the ideological fracture regarding what to do advances into the Advocacy age, where the consensus of government research alongside cooperative foundations would soon be

challenged by a conservative and merchant elite (Smith J. A., 1991) (Mizruchi, 2013) (Teles, 2008). At the time, American business organization had been minimal and the leaders felt “economically uncertain, culturally degraded, and legislatively out-foxed in the early 1970s” argues Waterhouse (2012), and boards in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the Business Roundtable begin to agitate about their future predicament. Director of the Chamber, Eugene Sydnor Jr. calls upon friend and neighbor Lewis Powell to pen a strategy.

Hollis-Brusky (2015, p. 147) refers to the shift as a conservative and libertarian counter-revolution orchestrated in law. Not only because of conservative court justices kept “in check” by the Federalist Society network, but also by creating a climate favorable to “once-radical ideas or constitutional theories.” Lewis Powell, board member of Phillip Morris and months from becoming a Supreme Court Justice from Richmond, VA, issued a call-to-arms in 1971 now known as the Powell Memo, for example. “The Attack on the American Free Enterprise System”, sent to the US Chamber of Commerce in confidentiality, laid out a systematic response, a countermovement to the expanding demands placed on the American economic system. His call to mount a united effort against left-wing ideology in all forms of idea generation and culture included surveillance and challenges to: universities, think tanks, and schools; pamphlets, paperbacks, and textbooks; media, radio, and television; and, finally, to believe corporations are not being aggressive enough until this becomes their primary concern. In particular, the Chamber needed its own “faculty of scholars”, incentivized into more

publishing across the broad spectrum of media.<sup>3</sup> The level of aggressive action called for is worth quoting (Powell, 1971):

*There should be no hesitation to attack the Naders, the Marcuses and others who openly seek destruction of the [American free enterprise] system. There should not be the slightest hesitation to press vigorously in all political arenas for support of the enterprise system. Nor should there be reluctance to penalize politically those who oppose it... It is time for American business—which has demonstrated the greatest capacity in all history to produce and to influence consumer decisions—to apply their great talents vigorously to the preservation of the system itself.*

Business executives soon saw expansive government as “the gravest threat to the survival of the free enterprise system”, summarize Silk and Vogel (1976), and ideology was the problem. One executive commented that “we have been successful in selling products, but not ourselves.”

Powell’s memo is not the sole cause for the so-called rightward shift in politics. But many think tanks cordial to the business community, like Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy, and Americans for

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<sup>3</sup> Powell was similar in his instructions with regards to foreign policy, offering President Nixon in 1970 another confidential paper entitled “Political Warfare”, stating therein “we must put aside the self-deception that the techniques of political warfare are unethical or immoral. The fact is on the domestic scene we employ many of these techniques against each other with considerable savagery.” (Jeffries Jr., 1994, p. 219)

Prosperity, consider this memo an inspiration; indeed, the comprehensive points made have since been adapted to create a counter-strategy for a public-oriented movement as well (Farmer, 2015).

Powell's memo also does not reveal the level of action, if any, taken after its creation. But a few newly rich foundations with equally few conservative political outlets were moved, "stirred" by the perceived attack on American businesses like John Olin, heir to the ammunitions and chemical empire that once rose to prominence in World War I and II with government contracts, now committed to funding a new political message in opposition to state social policy (Mayer, 2016).

The Koch brothers, Charles and David, are two names in *Forbes* top ten wealthiest people, and practice a conservatism that predates Powell's memo. Tactically, David is an overt proponent of neoliberal economics, which he bore out in a run on the Libertarian ticket as Vice President in 1980. Charles, on the other hand, preferred a more behind-the-scenes role. To a group of businessmen in 1974 Charles gave a warning, "business and the enterprise system are in trouble, and the hour is late," importantly he adds, "as the Powell Memorandum points out" (Mayer, 2016, p. 87). Ed Crane, after serving in the libertarian campaign of 1976, was asked by Charles to remain in the movement with the teaser, "how much [money] do you need?" To which, Crane replied "A libertarian think tank along the model of Brookings or AEI might be nice." Charles replied "I'll give it to you." And the Cato Institute was founded in 1977. Charles Koch thought the Chicago school scholars, like Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan, to be "sellouts to the system" because they preferred an efficient government "when libertarians should be

tearing it out at the root” (as cited in MacLean, 2017, p. 135, 142). The only quo for the quid was simple, pure allegiance; “compromise, Koch had made clear, was the kiss of death.” For this reason, MPS member James Buchanan, of the Virginia school, became a closer intellectual to Koch’s larger political project.<sup>4</sup>

New leaders from different backgrounds took the helm at think tanks in the Advocacy era. Anticipating a political shift, the president of the American Enterprise Association William Baroody rebranded the non-profit in 1962 as AEI in order to shed itself of its more trade-like image and “disguise the roots of his organization, to keep it from being dismissed as a businessman’s group” (Phillips-Fein, 2010). Baroody made his way from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to head the struggling AEA in 1962. Despite Baroody’s assistance to the 1964 Goldwater campaign — which attracted the attention of the IRS — some conservatives considered the think tank rather soft. Going further, a couple former political staffers believed the rebranded AEI was too reserved and “respectable”, in other words not conservative enough, not “militant”, according to Phillips-Fein. Former political staffers Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner Jr. would go on to form the Heritage Foundation with startup funds from the Coors Foundation. From a non-academic background, Weyrich was a religious political operative known for coining the “moral majority” with Jerry Falwell and, later, founding the American Legislative Exchange

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<sup>4</sup> The Cato Institute, therefore, was not the only manifestation of the Kochs, whom began seeding or funding many tax-exempt organizations, like the Reason Foundation, the Liberty Fund, Citizens for a Sound Economy which in 1984 split in two — Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks — Americans for Tax Reform, America Future Fund, Center to Protect Patient’s Rights, Americans for Limited Government, American Legislative Exchange Council, Americans for Job Security, State Policy Network, Leadership Institute, including the NRA, the National Association of Manufacturers and the Heritage Foundation.



Council. Fuelner served as an analyst in the CSIS, the Richard M. Weaver fellow in the London School of Economics, and as an aide to congressman Laird before becoming president of Heritage. Later, in 1981, he would earn his Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh. The Cato Institute, by comparison, was led by Ed Crane from 1977 to 2012, a financial analyst and vice president of the Alliance Capital Management Corporation. In 2012, however, he was pushed out by Charles and David for producing impractical theories by intellectuals instead of “intellectual ammunition that we can then use at Americans for Prosperity and our allied organizations”, reports Mayer (2016, p. 285). A war of ideas.

The Heritage Foundation, considered one of the most influential think tanks in the 1980s, would attract donations first from Joseph Coors and later Richard Mellon Scaife most notably, but also the Olin Foundation, the Noble Foundation, Pew Freedom Trust, New York Businessman Lewis Lehrman, Reader’s Digest, and large corporations, including some from Taiwan and South Korea (Peschek, 1987). Beginning the decade with a budget of \$1 million, the ascendant American Enterprise Institute would attract enough funding that by 1980 with \$10.4 million it surpassed the prestigious Brookings Institution, receiving funds from over 600 corporations, including the financial and technological elite (Peschek, 1987) (Ricci, 1993, p 160). In 2010, AEI’s budget was placed at \$29 million, whereas Heritage’s budget is \$80 million (McGann, 2016).

The charitable or dynastic trusts that funded conservative organizations also saw a transformation of their beneficiaries and endowments. In 1973, Richard Mellon Scaife inherited the family trusts (Sarah Scaife Foundation, the Alleghany and Carthage

foundations, and the Trust for Sarah Mellon Scaife's Grandchildren) from his mother, Sarah Mellon Scaife. The funds, largely derived from oil, Alcoa, and Mellon Bank, were distributed routinely to conservative think tanks. By 1980, AEI and the Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies had received about \$5 million each, Hoover Institution had received over \$4 million, and the Heritage Foundation received over \$2.5 million. Public Choice scholar James Buchanan was a Mont Pèlerin Society (1947) member and an early Scaife recipient after mentioning conservative's need for a "counter-Brookings" in order to undermine the "alleged economists." On this point, Buchanan who stylized himself as a 'social philosopher' was clear, he planned to construct "the way people think about government" (MacLean, 2017). Finally, Scaife was also an underwriter to the Milton Friedman television program "Free to Choose", as was the Olin Foundation.

Olin, with \$1 million a year to spend at its founding in 1977, for example, was small compared to the \$160 million of the Ford Foundation. But by 1982 the Olin Foundation's endowment had risen tenfold to \$125 million giving the foundation more resources. The Smith Richardson Foundation, with Randy Richardson receiving control in 1973, gave about \$3 million a year mostly aimed at supply-side economics. Take Jude Wanniski (1978), editor of the Wall Street Journal and fellow at AEI, on a grant from Smith-Richardson wrote *The Way the World Works*, coining the term "supply-side economics." The economic theory would be supported by Olin grantee and Manhattan Institute fellow Charles Murray. In concert, these new three foundations funded the Washington University's Center for the Study of American Business, University of Chicago's Center for the study of the Economy and State, and University of Rochester's

Center for Research in Government Policy and Business. They also founded the Institute for Educational Affairs, led by Irving Kristol and William Simon, which would attract 145 corporate donors by 1982 (Himmelstein, 1990).

On the left, by comparison, former political aides Richard Barnett and Marcus Raskin founded the IPS (1963). After becoming dismayed in the Kennedy administration, they amassed \$200,000 to start an anti-war policy institute and by 1973 had over fifty staff but saw much less future success in the rise of a counter-revolution. The IPS would be hampered by legal fees if not the probes and investigations by the FBI in what is known as COINTELPRO, a covert investigation of the New Left, a term first used by C. Wright Mills. The surveillance on the IPS was exposed by a former FBI agent in a sworn affidavit but directors discovered the probes as early as 1971. Court filings reveal there were more than 60 informants involving the IPS. By 1979, a settlement was reached, which included the FBI's admission of guilt, however monetary damages were not awarded. Additionally, it was revealed that in 1969 Haldeman, Nixon's Chief of staff, disagreed when an assistant called for the IRS "to go after Brookings and the IPS." Haldeman, distrusting the IRS, leaned toward patience adding, if "we really want to start playing the game tough, you might wish to consider my suggestion of some months ago that we consider going into Brookings after the classified material which they have stashed over there" [it was believed Brookings had the Pentagon Papers] (Oudes, 1989, p. 146). By 1972 the IRS filed charges against the IPS for several tax code violations dating back to 1966. While IPS would go on to win this case as well, the potential loss would have absolved the organization. Conversely, Heritage would not attract as much attention at the time, and AEI's skirmish with the IRS — keeping Baroody on salary

while running Goldwater's intellectual campaign — in the '60s was trivial, according to Medvetz (2012, pp. 124-127). In 1976, the IPS would suffer further loss as two IPS staff members were killed in a car bomb on Embassy Row in Washington D.C. targeting former Chilean President Allende's ambassador to the US and critic of current Chilean President Pinochet (Smith J. A., 1991). Heritage's *Mandate for Leadership* in 1980 even listed IPS as a potential internal security threat. At this point, donors dwindled and IPS was reduced to receiving over half of its funding from one foundation. Although in 2002, IPS has a \$2 million budget without any donations from corporations or government agencies, and about 30 staff members (Abelson, 2006).

It is misleading to consider the breadth of donations equal. While the IPS dwindled down to one major donor, the Heritage Foundation for instance increased its high-profile donor list, though not quite as much as AEI. Stahl (2016) argues, think tanks, like Heritage, began marketing themselves as safer alternatives to traditional political spending in light of the Watergate scandal. AEI had, however, anticipated the void of conservative policies, in part, when president William Baroody found early support from anti-new deal businessmen. General Motors, General Electric, Mobil, Proctor and Gamble had become contributors to AEI, a think tank by now clearly associated with the political Right (Phillips-Fein, 2010). Heritage, by contrast, was primarily funded by a select few, according to Medvetz (2012, p. 125), "71 were corporations or corporate foundations, 41 were individuals or couples, and 39 were philanthropic foundations," of whom 44 gave over \$100,000. Scaife, the leading contributor, gave \$23 million over the course of 24 years beginning in 1974.

Scaife would contribute to many think tanks including the CSIS, the Hoover Institution, the Manhattan Institute, the ICS, and other legal foundations (Hollis-Brusky, 2015). The Washington Post estimated Scaife had donated over \$100 million to conservative causes in 1981. But the Bradley foundation would secede Scaife as the largest conservative foundation by the end of the century, delivering more than \$13 million to each, AEI and Heritage. As a result of conservative foundations, by the 1990s the budget of the Heritage Foundation surpasses that of the entire liberal cluster in Washington (Rich and Weaver, 2000).

The deference from technocrats to legislators until *after* congressional votes in the past was now seen as an oversight. This new, aggressive and result-oriented approach wound politics and expertise tighter in setting the agenda (Stahl, 2016). The Heritage Foundation found success almost immediately with the Reagan Administration. Just seven years after its founding, Heritage's *Mandate for Leadership* became an integral guide to the Reagan administration prompting Heritage to claim 60 percent of Reagans' policies are derived from their report (Peschek, 1987). Aide to the president and future Attorney General Edwin Meese III, for example, personally received the study. President Reagan would show direct support to Heritage: "it goes back to what [Richard] Weaver had said and what Heritage is all about," the President continued, "Ideas do have consequences. Rhetoric is policy, and words are action" (Smith J. A., 1991, p. 20).

With the success of Heritage's *Mandate for Leadership*, the new political-intellectual recipe took shape. Ed Crane points to *Mandate* stating "I guess maybe it did give us the idea" for Cato's 1984 report (Richberg, 1984). Policy shops sparked and various reports

with similar hopes of persuading the agenda showered on presidential candidate George H.W. Bush, leaving him to choose from at least 36, mostly from think tanks.

So, after three Republican administrations, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), funded by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), proffered the *Mandate for Change* to the Clinton administration (Rich, 2004). The PPI found success with Clinton, in part, according to William Galston a former PPI fellow, by stumping around the country at events without campaigning for president, publishing policy ideas in hardcover, and validating Clinton's ideas by giving him a political platform inside the beltway (Medvetz, 2012).

Think tanks also bolster the credibility of their craft with ritual rewards as symbols of achievement and prestige. Milton Friedman, for example, said that the announcement of a Nobel award (Friedman & Friedman, 1998, p. 453):

*converts its recipients into an instant expert on all and sundry, and unleashes hordes of ravenous newsmen and photographers from journals and TV stations around the world. I myself have been asked my opinion on everything from a cure for the common cold to the market value of a letter signed by John F. Kennedy. Needless to say the attention is flattering but also corrupting.*

The Memorial Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences is commonly seen as the pinnacle of academic achievement, given to those who 'had conferred the greatest benefit to mankind' in the last year. MPS member James Buchanan had suggested they mirror the

newly formed Nobel in economics, then without an MPS winner, as an attempt to glamourize conservatism (MacLean, 2017). But with economics the empirical evidence to support the award is arguable and less like prizes in chemistry and physics. By example, polar opposites in literary economics Gunnar Myrdal and Friedrich von Hayek shared the Nobel Prize of 1974, each submitting a speech addressing the very persuasiveness of a ‘science’ built on a foundation that must involve morals and values. The near mechanical split, argue Offer and Söderberg, between liberals (26 NPWs) and conservatives (25 NPWs), as well as between formalists and empiricists, is intended to give the appearance of neutrality (where in academia there is little) in order to avoid politicization. Indeed, flat-earthers may be given a platform but that does not objectively mean the debate is balanced or neutral; nor does the stork and the mother have equal claim to the origin of children. Though the award may have begun on a whim of the Swedish National Bank reacting to pressures from social democracy, the prize has nevertheless maintained an unmatched level of symbiotic prestige linking eminent scholar and Nobel prize (Offer & Söderberg, 2016).

A few think tanks follow this practice, blending the institution with the right academics and political entrepreneurs. The Cato Institute’s biennium Milton Friedman Prize is lucrative (\$500,000 in 2002) if however less venerable and seems to carry less prestige than the Nobel (Offer & Söderberg, 2016). AEI created the Francis Boyer Award, named after an early AEI donor and CEO of Smith, Klein, and French, and first bestowed the honor to President Gerald Ford in 1977 and then President Reagan in 1989.<sup>5</sup> In 2003,

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<sup>5</sup> Several recipients are from law (Robert Bork, Anton Scalia, and Clarence Thomas), some are political operatives (Henry Kissinger, Jeanne Kirkpatrick) and financiers (Paul Volcker).

the award was renamed in honor of Irving Kristol and bestowed to Allan Meltzer, Charles Murray, David Patreus, and most recently Nikki Haley in 2019. The Heritage Foundation held its first-ever Honors gala in 2019 with Vice President Pence headlining the event, which included the delivery of their pinnacle award: the Clare Booth Luce award to Edward Feltner. Previous recipients include Ronald Reagan (who beforehand awarded Clare Luce with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the first female member of Congress recipient and vocal critic of Roosevelt's war), Milton and Rose Friedman, William F. Buckley, Rush Limbaugh, and Roger Ailes.

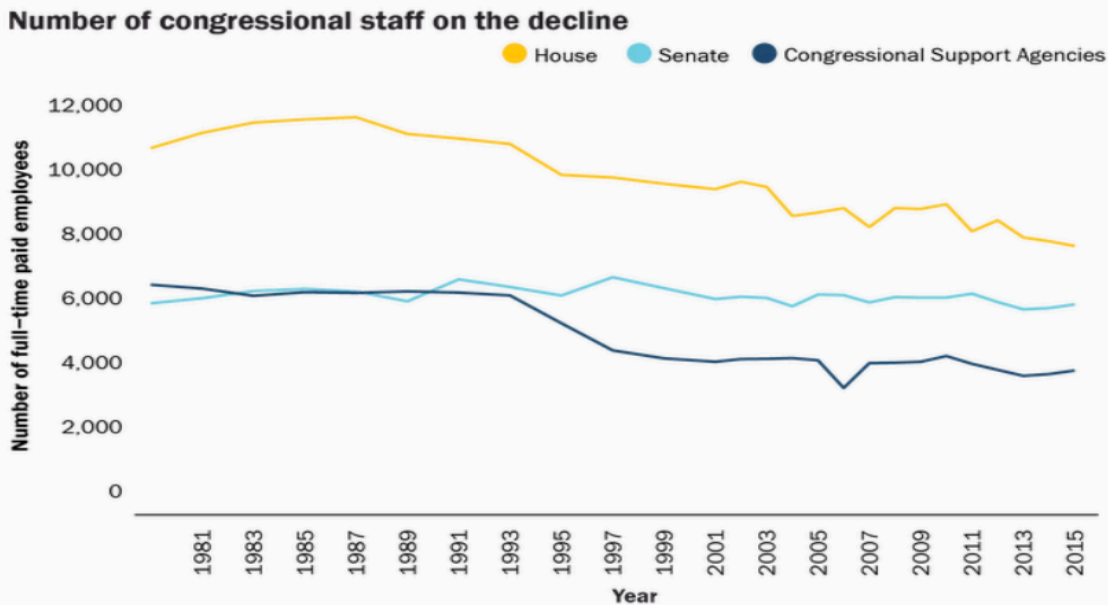
EPI celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with a Distinguished Economist award to Paul Krugman and awards to labor leaders, Hoffmann and Mitchell from Wisconsin. The neoliberal Information Technology and Innovation Foundation launched the Luddite Awards, as a PR stunt meant to dishonor its recipients as anti-technologists (a misnomer to luddites) including Steve Wozniak for supporting a ban on "killer robots", Stephen Hawking, and Elon Musk (Rauch, 2018).

At the same time that America witnesses an explosion of partisan think tanks, it is important to note the politician's ability to rely on bi-partisan publicly-funded research has plummeted. Some vital statistics kept by the Brookings Institution are helpful (see figure 2.1). From steady support throughout the Reagan and Bush I administrations, the number of congressional staff from support agencies falls by a third in the Clinton administration, House staff declined as well.



A more nuanced view (see figure 2.2) reveals a steady decline of congressional support agency staffs. Under Clinton’s budget cuts legislative resources were decimated, absolving of the OTA in 1995 but particularly the GAO despite being considered the least partisan of the remaining three support agencies, and to say little of the Library of Congress (Bimber, 1996). The declining trend, if held, bodes gravely for the remaining legislative resources. Director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Trump administration, Mick Mulvaney claimed that the time for the CBO “has come and gone” (Cottle, 2017). A somewhat odd claim from the head of the OMB considering evidence the CBO is routinely more accurate in their budget assessments by comparison (Bimber, 1996).

**Figure 2. 1: Congressional Staff**



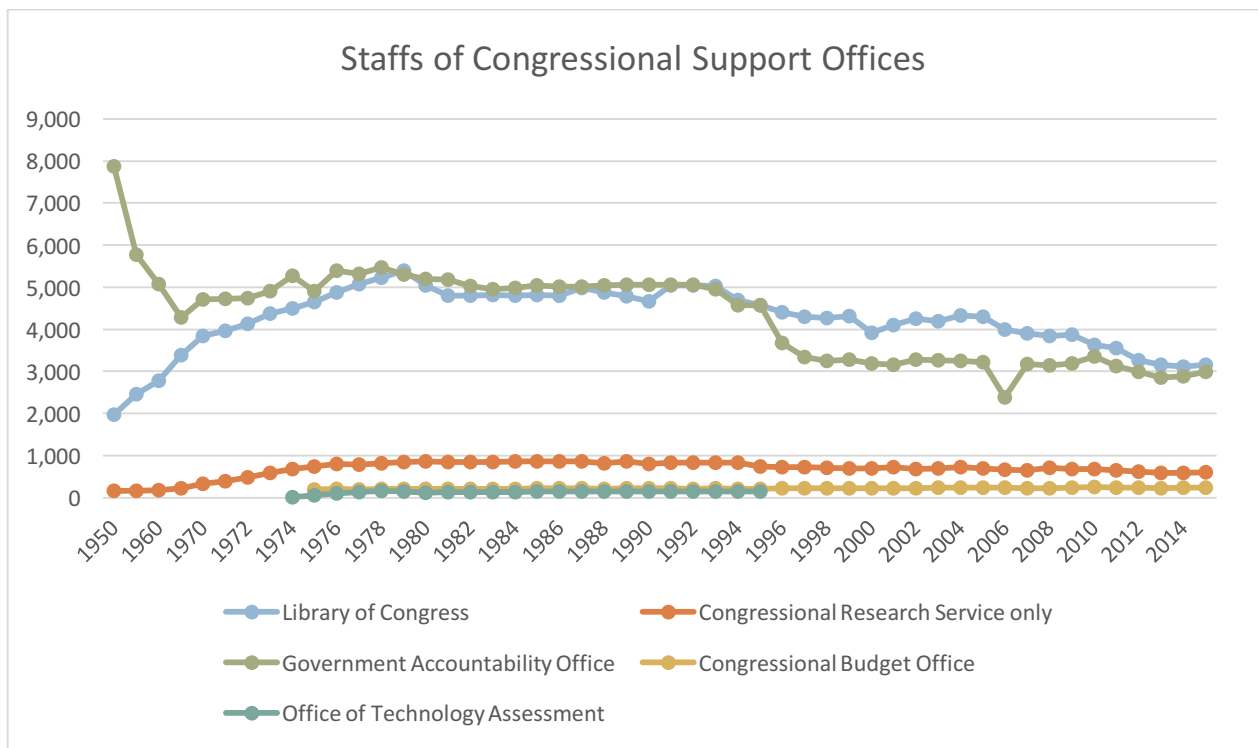
Source: The Brookings Institution. 2019. Vital Statistics on Congress [Table 5-1].

BROOKINGS

Frederick Mosher (1984) provides an early comparison of two publicly funded think tanks that originated under the same law in 1921, the GAO and OMB. While they have

since moved toward each other in practice, particularly with their interest in the future, they have also diverged unto their respective overseers leading Mosher to term them the Congressional agency and Presidential agency, respectively. Their products are written communication, primarily; they write to Congress but even for Congressional support staff, “its best channel to Congress is the media — the press and television” (Mosher, 1984, p. 174).

**Figure 2. 2: Staffs of Congressional Support Offices**



Source: The Brookings Institution 2019, Vital Statistics on Congress

Though the tendency for the executive branch to have an ostensibly more political think tank than the bi-partisan congressional support agencies, for example, is easily arrived at, the overall importance and trust in these publicly-funded experts however is unmatched in the non-profit sector, according to many congressional members, including Sen. Orrin Hatch (Bimber, 1996).

Think tanks emerged in a period of unfathomable private wealth directed at improving government and repairing social strife, as well as purposive reimaging of the robber barons. Depoliticized experts were funded to help government think and usher in a nation-sized administration, like with the creation of the Bureau of the Budget as well as the Government Accountability Office. The Government Contract era saw for the most part concerted goals between foundations, government, and experts. The far-right think tanks were disorganized, cautious, and more comfortable in Geneva than America. However, under economic and social pressures, elite conflict, and declining trust in Government, the Advocacy era boomed with policy windows that had not been open for forty years if ever, simultaneously honing new tactics for experts speaking to and influencing policy makers.

## **Ch. 3 Politics and the Media**

The common belief of the political landscape is that of reasoned debate, an endless flux of give and take between well-intentioned policymakers. However, the current moment in political history is arguably a period of critical realignment among the parties (Greenberg, 2015). Some, like Mann and Ornstein (2012) reject the democratic stalemate caused by drifting parties in lieu of a more radical leap by the Republican party in a dramatic turn to the right. Whereas the Democratic party shows signs of drifting, it has more or less stayed in its historical political lane. Since 1972, the right turn of Republicans has ventured into unexplored conservatism as measured by roll-call votes in figure 3.1, and Democrats coalesce similar to the unity after the first World War (Lewis, et al., 2019).

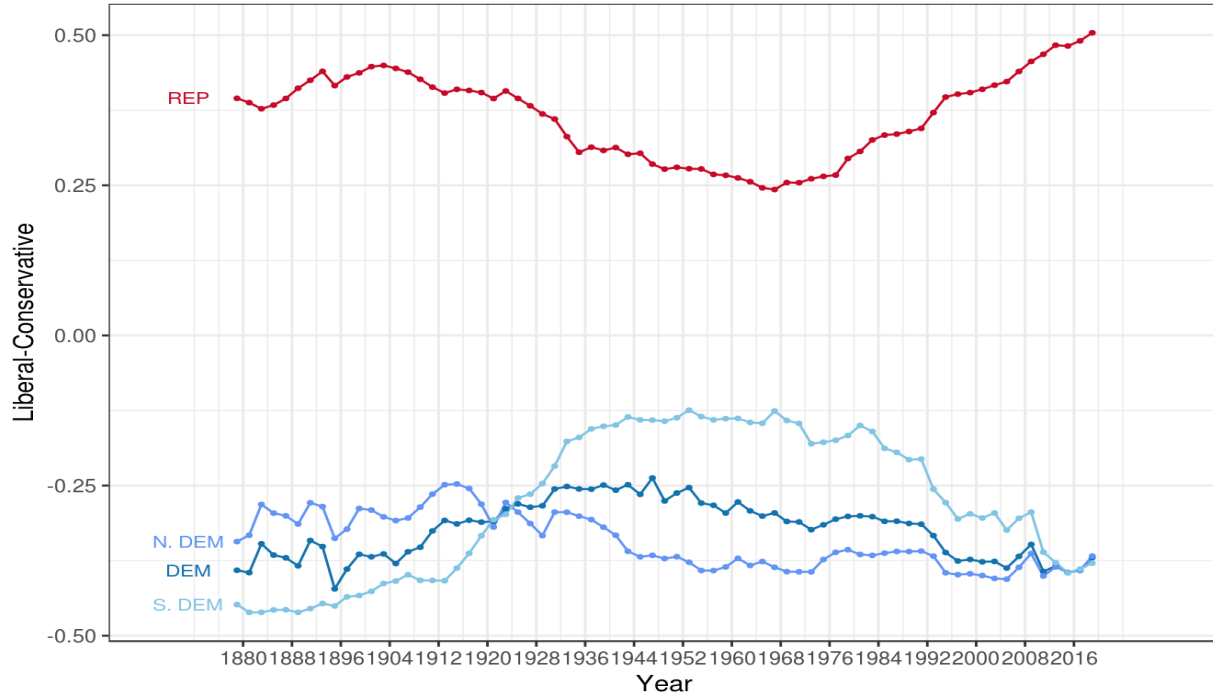
The Republican party is captured by a conservative fringe in a “race to the base”, the base being the most devoted members of the party, according to Mann and Ornstein. Moreover, the Republican playbook has narrowed to that of tax-cut prescriptions as a cure-all, which has led to the appearance of political entrepreneurs with prepackaged solutions looking for problems rather than building consensus (Hacker & Pierson, 2005). At the same time, this gives the republican party the impression of unity or consensus relative to Democrats. Most importantly, a cross-disciplinary study of the resultant political landscape makes the claim that increasing polarization, aided by rampant inequality, and a media that disrupts the flow of information are interconnected, mutually enhancing their impact on the stability of democracy

(Wiesner, et al., 2018). For example, the elite, particularly the young and rich, decreasingly value the legitimacy of liberal democracy (Mounk, 2018, pp. 109-110). This group approved of military rule at a rate of six percent twenty years ago but that figure has since exploded fivefold to 35 percent. American millennials think of democracy as a bad or very bad system of government 23 percent of the time. The highest international average, for comparison, is Russia with 26 percent.

The main driver of polarization, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, p. 223) argue, is that the Republican leadership has been “eviscerated” by wealthy 501(c)4s like Americans for Prosperity, Americans for Tax Reform and so on, that have been able to frame the agenda using “scorched earth” tactics, boxing out party members unaligned. A second cause is the rising influence of right-wing media, surpassing the party’s own leadership at times. These two sources of influence in the Republican party have in concert eviscerated the party’s leadership structure.

This chapter of the study will review the political and media landscape in which think tanks operate. As interconnected phenomena, politics and the media are difficult to separate as one informs the other in cycle; changes in politics reflect changes in media. More specifically, I will review how this increasingly complex terrain impacts think tanks and their products, compelling them toward predatory and negligent behavior at times. Finally, I argue that science, experts, and modern think tanks are both symptoms and causes to the information crisis in U.S. politics.

**Figure 3. 1: The Polarization of Congress**



Source: “The Polarization of Congress” [https://voteview.com/articles/party\\_polarization](https://voteview.com/articles/party_polarization).

The political landscape must first be placed in context of rising social inequality, a chasm misunderstood by the public more generally (Norton & Ariely, 2011; see figure 3.2). Some argue inequality itself is the issue, notable as the middle-class vanishes (Sitaraman, 2017; Stiglitz, 2015; Temin, 2017), and an argument that would not matter politically so long as the wealthy and the rest of population held similar views. Or, put another way, it is difficult to expect people to see problems the same way when they experience them so differently.<sup>6</sup> Given heightened inequality, voters should be redefined as investors in an update to the Downsian median-voter theorem. Representatives, then, “leap-frog” one another in order to attract the most investors (Ferguson, 1995). The

<sup>6</sup> From 2008 to 2018, real GDP in Democrat districts increased from \$35.7 to \$49 billion, whereas Republican districts dropped from \$33.3 to \$32.6 billion, and Republicans gained 5% of House seats in the same time. When it comes to the median pocketbook, Democrat districts saw household income increase 17 percent, while Republican districts fell 3 percent (Zitner & Chinni, 2019).

Institute for New Economic Thinking issued a working paper utilizing the median-*investor* theorem on campaign spending, the tip of the iceberg when it comes to finance in elections. Since 1980, with exception to but a couple races, the investor argument has been well approximated (Ferguson, Jorgensen, & Chen, 2016). While others (Gilens, 2012) corroborate the significant role of the affluent in policy, Page, Bartels, and Seawright (2013, p. 67) study the ultra rich, more specifically those in .01% of yearly U.S. income in order to glean what are the ultra rich's level of political activity and perspectives compared to the general public. Notably, the ultra-rich are much more concerned about budget deficits and more favorable to cutting social programs, "especially Social Security and Health Care", than the public. Specifically, those who are paid \$5-40 million are "less favorable to increasing government regulation of Wall Street firms, the healthcare industry, small business," and importantly "large corporations." However, Bartels maintains that the affluent have always been influential, even in more equal countries (Achen & Bartels, 2016).

**Figure 3. 2: The actual United States wealth distribution plotted against the estimated and ideal distributions.<sup>7</sup>**



Source: (Norton & Ariely, 2011)

But this is not to say party differences necessarily equate to simple differences in wealth or that parties have no mutual grounds (Piketty, 2018). Winters (2011) makes the argument that income defense becomes the pinnacle objective of the ultra-rich, regardless of party, hoodwinking the merely affluent and surmounting belief in democracy. Following this line of thought, Lindsey and Teles (2017) find common ground for either party to address corruption, put in terms of “captured” economies, in which a small faction is able to produce a regressive system through the capture of regulation in myriad ways. For the left and the right, this capture allows the US to be dominated by rent-seeking. The left, for instance, believe that ‘natural’ market tendencies create inequality and that the government should rectify this, simultaneously blind to captured government regulators reinforcing inequality, like in the financial sector. The right, likewise, will decry government involvement as industries are over-

<sup>7</sup> In the "Actual" line, the bottom two quintiles are not visible because the lowest quintile owns just 0.1% of all wealth, and the second-lowest quintile owns 0.2%.



regulated, slowing growth, simultaneously stating that the distribution of wealth is OK (Mankiw, 2013), and blind to redistributed wealth caused by rent-seeking. Such capture, ultimately, stifles downstream innovation by cornering markets and industries and intensifies inequality.

Perhaps most importantly, the American Dream is less and less a reality with entrenched wealth. From a captured economy and rising inequality, we then witness the generational relationship to inequality (Corak, 2013), in which intergenerational mobility is strongly associated to inequality, indicating family background matters more than hard work. Alan Krueger, chair of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, deemed these data "the Great Gatsby Curve."

Though wealth and income inequality have reached levels unseen since the Gilded age, economic policy and inequality is not the only concern in American politics. If Levitsky and Ziblatt point to supply-side threats such as ultra-rich donors and effective right wing media, as a top-down force on liberal democracy, others point to compounding demand-side threats from the people. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) not only reference popular claims of *relative deprivation*, but also *distrusted politicians*, *de-aligned parties*, and the *deconstruction of national identities*. Put simply, wealthy, educated politicians are increasingly insulated, leaving them detached from their constituents. Moreover, this has led to parties severed from the desires of the people, which include distrust of free-trade as well as immigration. This is to say orthodox economics, alone, is insufficient if one is to address the popular claims rising in liberal democracies.

Think tanks, anxious to influence policy, increasingly rely on result-oriented activity that produce win-win solutions with their donors. Sometimes this behavior is lauded, but in others it is predatory, and in the process absolves them of their lofty credibility. Instead of leveraging shared values from stakeholders, think tank products align with their donors' interests, neither transparently fair to nor in the public's interests, despite public subsidization in the form of tax-deductions and -exemptions.

This following section will review the political parameters of think tanks and other social welfare groups in a captured economy. What follows is the operational space within which think tanks conduct themselves. Kingdon ([1984]/2011) suggests jurisdictional competition that cuts across executive and legislative branches can lead to battles that increase movement on the agenda, while others result in a stalemate. Sometimes, institutions attempt to see around corners in order to curb the need for legislation. In this case, institutional foresight is stymied by sterilizing legislation. The IRS's attempt to get a grasp on the thriving think tanks industry is illustrative.

## **Above the law**

Crossroads GPS is tapped for scrutiny by the IRS when it applied for social welfare status as a tax-exempt 501(c)4. Crossroads was one of the best funded social welfare 501(c)4s, founded by Karl Rove, George W. Bush's deputy chief of staff, which ostensibly attracts attention to the organization as a political entity. Understandable attention, according to AEI scholar Norm Ornstein (2016), Crossroads should be a 527-political organization but Rove chose to file it as a 501(c)4 because 527s must disclose their donors. The intention was made quite explicit by Crossroads political director Carl Forti

in 2010: “You know, disclosure was very important to us, which is why the [super PAC] was created. But some donors didn’t want to be disclosed, and, therefore, the (c)4 was created” (Maguire, 2016). In effect, anonymously funded social welfare groups are subsidized by the public, aiding the work of government, and “government”, Woodrow Wilson (1961, p. 76) wrote, “ought to be all outside and no inside.” Today, anonymity around social welfare groups is a very political issue, attracting funds from foreign investors which I will address later. In the public and among those familiar with think tanks, a majority (67%) wish to see donors transparent (Hashemi & Muller, 2018).

The vote on HR 5053 Preventing IRS Abuse and Protecting Free Speech in 2016 is a good litmus test for politicization regarding anonymous donations in 501(c)4s.

Currently, donations over \$5,000 must still be disclosed only to the IRS. This bill allows 501(c)4s to completely avoid disclosing their donors to the IRS, under claims of tedious paperwork (Govtrack.us, 2019). Passing the House, votes were nearly split down party lines, all but one Republican voted “Aye” and all but one Democrat voted “Nay.” The bill would die in the Senate, but similar party lines could easily be forecasted.

Definitions must be addressed before going further. The IRS (IRS, 2019) treats *political activity* and *lobbying* differently, depending on the charitable organization section used, 501(c)3 or 501(c)4. Only 501(c)4s may engage in political activity and “germane” lobbying toward legislation, so long as they operate “exclusively to promote social welfare” (this is further refined to “primary” activity, or rather, a benchmark of more than half of an organization’s expenditures). Neither group may engage directly or indirectly with campaigns. 501(c)3 donations are tax-deductible and tax-exempt;

501(c)4 donations are tax-exempt but not tax-deductible nor publicly available — in other words, dark money. Think tanks have registered under either classification; some have sister (c)4s like the Center for American Progress Action Fund (founded in 2004) and Heritage Action for America (founded in 2010), which can accept unlimited anonymous donations and then transfer resources to its sister 501(c)3 think tank, a transaction which does not qualify as political activity. Not to be confused, these organizations differ from 527s and Super Pacs which are allowed to be *primarily* political but *must* disclose their (potentially unlimited) donors, and do not have to operate “exclusively [primarily] to promote social welfare.” 501(c)4s, albeit, can also give unlimited funds to Super Pacs, 501(c)3s, or 527, again not considered political activity, and easily circumnavigating reporting guidelines.

During the investigation of Crossroads GPS, tax-exempt applications increased but not near the rate dark money ballooned. Over the course of 2000-2010 about \$100 million was spent in (c)4s; in 2012, it was \$300 million, with conservative causes flush with cash after receiving 85 percent of the total (Choma, 2013). While applications from 2010 increased more than a thousand to 2774 in 2012, only eight 501(c)4 applications to the IRS in 2012 were denied (IRS - SOI, 2019). In 2016, so few were denied of the 1877 applications that the number could not be disclosed in order to protect the identity of taxpayers. In 2018, over half of all dark money groups opted not to disclose donor information, as a note on the scale of anonymity in (c)4s (Center for Responsive Politics, 2019).

To be clear Crossroads is less of a think tank (not one for my study) and more of a financial headquarters to a movement but shares the same tax-exempt social welfare status as many think tanks, exemplifying some of the definitional complexities aforementioned and the broad legal swath social welfare groups are afforded.

In the review of Crossroads GPS activity, it was determined just two percent of their budget went to issue advocacy and social welfare, most was transferred to other political groups and all but one television ad took place over an eleven-week window prior to the election in 2010 and, importantly, in 2013 Crossroads GPS was denied tax-exempt status (Maguire, 2016).

The designation was short lived, however, and the IRS reversed its decision. Despite bipartisan and independent investigations reporting no wrongdoing, in 2015, the IRS backed off of Crossroads like the 90% of unanswered calls that were made during 2015's filing season and the 13,000 employees let go since 2010 due to budget cuts.

The new IRS commissioner John Koskinen jumpstarted a team to clarify "the facts and standards" organizations use to determine (c)4 applications. "What we're trying to do is not change the rules of the game but to have a clearer set of guidelines" Koskinen tells the Senate Finance Committee, "clarify, not change the rules in which these organizations operate... clarity will benefit everyone." Republican Sen. Hatch replied with alternative directions, to wit: "I strongly encourage you to stop spending agency time on such controversial and counterproductive proposals" in the IRS targeting investigation hearing on October 27, 2015. Democratic Sen. Nelson pushes Koskinen

further on his guidance for (c)4s, and Koskinen replies that there are three questions they are exploring: “What is the definition of political activity? How much can you do? And to which (c) organization should the standard apply.” Afterwards, republican pressure on Koskinen and the IRS becomes ascendant.

Under the guise of infringing free speech, Republicans attacked Koskinen for the investigation of Crossroads GPS and other Tea party groups. Then, impeachment began to be tossed around for “misleading Congress about his predecessors.” Rep. Chaffetz believed deception was at hand and led the charge against Koskinen. This was despite conclusive independent investigations from the Department of Justice that warranted no charges to his predecessor or himself (Rein, 2015). It should be added, impeachment was unprecedented at this administrative rank. Though the alleged actions for impeachment took place before Koskinen became commissioner, House Republicans were undeterred by the DOJ and were not only going after his job, they wanted to retract Koskinen’s pension.

The security of his job was one tactic of the battle, but Republicans sought to prevent any gross changes to social welfare groups and protect anonymity. A Republican legislative assault rose in the House during this investigative period. Members Grassley, Coats, Cornyn, Flake, and Ryan each submitted bills proposing to amend all manner of 501(c)4s, including allowing (c)4s to be tax-deductible, prohibiting the disclosure of donors to the IRS, increased penalties for unauthorized inspections, required notification to Congress when the IRS Commissioner decides *not* to fire an employee, mandatory unpaid leave for no less than 30 days for reviewing a (c)4 with scrutiny based

on ideology expressed in the name or purpose of the organization, rules for tax classification from 2010 should remain unchanged until 2017, or redirects (c)4 applications after 270 days to Federal courts etc. Though the scorched earth tactics leave nothing behind, Koskinen, a careerist known for his leadership in the Clinton administration with the Y2K transition, persevered and stepped down under his own volition in 2017 at 78 stating “survival is its own reward” (Rappeport, 2017).

The treatment of the IRS exemplifies how scorched earth tactics failed to permit a constructive debate over what is inherently political, given by the vote on HR 5053, but also must occur in order to ascertain the taxable or non-taxable criterion for “political activity”, “exclusively”, and “primarily.” Moreover, the limits to political activity appear to be redrawn with the success of Crossroads GPS and Karl Rove, if drawn at all. Furthermore, jurisdictional competition resulted in a stalemate as the IRS was defanged as an institution and its commissioner intimidated. Result-driven ultra-rich are, therefore, able to funnel economic resources toward ideological movements unhindered, thus creating vehicles for propaganda that prey on the knowledge and understanding of the public. Perhaps more importantly, the debate over the ways transparency interacts or relates to political activity was checked and blocked, leaving think tanks carte blanc when it comes to (c)4 activity.

## **Thinking globally**

Foreign relationships with domestic think tanks are increasingly common. McGann (2016) argues, on one hand, think tanks forge “bridges across national borders” while Stone (2004) argues, on the other hand, proto-think tanks exported the westernized

think tank model to the developing world which further frustrates the relationship between research and policy given unequal power dynamics. Indeed, both views are supported in the literature as international academic cooperation is facilitated by think tanks expanding to global markets, like Brookings with offices in Qatar, China, and India at the same time pan-European think tanks have opened offices in major capitals. The European Council on Foreign Relations has offices in Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, and Madrid. This suggests credence to Rich (2004), for example, where Washington, D.C. based think tanks are more likely to receive opportunities to testify in Congress and gain visibility in the news.

Some think tanks receive substantial funding from foreign governments, individuals, and corporations. Investments from foreign countries complicate matters of foreign agents, particularly with concern to tax-exemption and transparency. AEI, for instance, received over half a million dollars from Taiwan, an act which appears to draw more attention to whether or not foreign agents are at work than whether or not that activity be subsidized by U.S. government (Clifton, 2013). Economic and military support of Taiwan has long been promoted as AEI's VP of Asia Studies, Dan Blumenthal — also the CEO of Pacific Solutions LLC, a company dedicated to expanding business in the Asian marketplace. In a hearing titled “The China Challenge”, Blumenthal testified to Congress about the importance of Taiwan (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2018): “the era of reform in China is over and probably [has been] for 10 years... China is back to running state enterprises directed by the party” and “Taiwan stands as



‘ground zero’ for China’s coercive economic activities.”<sup>8</sup> In closing, Blumenthal states the “greatest economic coercion strategy... on China is helping to build free-market trade agreements and free-market economics in Asia” that exclude China.

Troubled diplomatic relationships with foreign governments extend to think tanks when accepting foreign donations from the government in question, particularly in confusion after a tragedy or crisis. In a special on C-SPAN, CQ/Roll Call’s Tom Frank (2019) made a comparison of think tank responses during the brief political vacuum after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi (and before the U.N.’s investigative report blaming Saudi Arabia), and argues responses are illustrative of foreign influence. Political inaction or suspicion was the expert advice of CSIS, to distrust claims of murder and torture; whereas Brookings, on the other hand, came out early against the murder and relations with the Saudi government. Behind the scenes, the Saudis are regular donors to CSIS, and Qataris, enemies of the Saudis (Al Jazeera, 2017), donate to Brookings.

In response to the murder, Ben Freeman, director of the Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative, writes (2019) “the Saudi lobby in Washington is feverishly contacting Executive branch officials and Congressional offices to stymie legislation that would punish Saudi Arabia for its actions, and they’re likely making campaign contributions to those same Members of Congress.” By examining supplemental

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically citing China’s reluctance to *identify* Taiwan (gleaned via apologies to China from Delta and Marriot for listing Taiwan as a country in which it operates), China’s state-owned enterprises pressure Taiwanese businessman to vote pro-China, China’s attraction of Taiwanese top talent, and military practices on Taiwanese shores, amounts to Blumenthal’s coercive activities.

statements made to the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which require registered foreign agents to report all “political activity”, Saudis engaged in at least 1900 political activities through many firms like the MSL group (formerly Qorvis Communication) and APCO Worldwide. These firms, then, made contact at least 64 times to think tanks. This figure is the floor of the various firms’ activities because contact to think tanks was not overly descriptive with dates, times, who was contacted whether by interview or email, rather, 64 indicates if contact was made in the last 6 months at least once.

Situations like the murder of Khashoggi put think tanks, and in some cases the universities that house these think tanks, on precarious standing. This concern is raised if strong laws on foreign influence are not in place argues Project On Government Oversight director Lydia Dennett (2019). Saudi companies, individuals, and the Saudi Kingdom have spent over \$89 million in 2017, namely at George Washington University. Saudi Arabia is not the biggest foreign contributor, however. Giving over \$1 billion is the small country of Qatar with less than 2.5 million people and known supporter of U.S. deemed terrorist group Hamas. While disclosure is mandated by participating in the federal student-aid program, the FBI claims some foreign investments are a ploy for access to emerging technologies. According to Amnesty International, the credibility of universities is diminished for those who are willing to work with nations that do not support democratic values.

Rising global conflict will draw closer scrutiny to those policy organizations unwilling to sever ties from their more illiberal foreign donors. As evidenced above, China attracts

Congress' attention for their dominant state-military-run economy. Senators and Representatives have, for example, called on universities to close Confucius Institutes (CI) amid critical testimony from director of the FBI, Christopher Wray. At least ten such institutes have closed, with president of Texas A&M citing concern from two representatives as the impetus for its closure (Redden, 2018; Redden, 2019). The Woodrow Wilson Center's Kissinger Institute on China and the United States issued a report that not all but some PRC diplomats and students of CI intimidate, censor "sensitive content", and threaten the safety of faculty, students, and administrators in U.S. universities, particularly cash-strapped public universities but also "wealthy Ivy League institutes" and small liberal arts colleges (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018). Among other monitoring- and cost-related recommendations, the report seeks clarity on distinguishing between "academic" and "scholastic" exemptions from FARA.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, a new elite see themselves as world citizens "participating in a global market [and] supporting international trade and migration", argues the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies director (Huntington, 2004). More recently the emphasis has been on the freedom of capital to travel to international markets with less focus on the freedom of labor to travel (e.g. Brexit and Trump). As world citizens, there is elite consensus with regards to market globalization, argues Piketty (2018), among the Brahmin left and Merchant right both supporting open international markets, disembarking from protectionist economic policies that were prominent for much of U.S. history (Bairoch, 1993). Think tanks may become captive by the elite mindset, much like politicians or regulators, concerning global capital markets by cognitive or epistemic capture (Kwak, 2014).

Transformational leaders with global experience are taking the helm of these institutions. Brookings Institution, for example, is headed by John Rutherford Allen, a retired U.S. Marine Corps four-star general and former commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan. U.S. deputy secretary of defense during the Clinton administration John J. Hamre has been CEO of CSIS since 2000 and in 2007 Donald Rumsfeld made him chairman of the Defense Policy Board. The Cato Institute is headed by MPS member and former Barclays Capital banker Peter Goettler.

This is not to say global think tanks advocate for a monolithic political-economic system, though some do. Frederick Hayek, Milton Friedman, Frank Knight founded the Mont Pèlerin Society as an early European think tank in 1947. Hayek, thereby, fulfilled his own recommendation to Antony Fisher not to run for political office because “the decisive influence in the battle of ideas and policy was wielded by intellectuals” and instead to change the way politicians think with a “scholarly institute”, or “something halfway between a scholarly association and a political society” (Burgin, 2009; Curtis, 2011). Hayek developed a ‘neoliberalism’ that would give rise to the Chicago (Friedman) and Virginia (Buchanan, Gordon, and Tullock) schools of thought but differs in that American neoliberalism fails to adequately take account for the rest of the world; European neoliberals did not have such luxuries, argues Slobodian (2018). While James Buchanan and Milton Friedman, both MPS members and Nobel Prize winners, involved themselves globally, for example, in 1970s Chile, the successes of the EEC and

WTO point to the hopes similar to that of MPS and “ordoglobalism”: an institutionalized international market system unencumbered from federated nations, democracies, or empires. Ordoglobalism is less a theory of markets or economics than of law and state, argues Slobodian. Like contemporaries Keynes and Polanyi, Hayek and the Geneva school agree the market does not and cannot take care of itself as if by invisible hands. But unlike Keynes and Polanyi, the role of government involved should be skeletal. The Geneva school serves as status quo and income protection, in part, because democracy is not a prerequisite, nor is justice, redistribution, or equality, simply the institution. For neoliberals, the struggle becomes how to reconcile Hayek’s market, as the greatest “information processor” nature provides, with the realization such markets have not come about naturally, but must be constructed (Mirowski, 2013). Much like the boundarilessness of Huntington’s (2004) “emerging global superclass,” ordoglobalism supports a jurisdictional global market for capital of the state and yet superseding the state.

Showing variation to the neoliberal framework of MPS, AEI does not fully engage in a global market, as Senior Fellow Michael Greve (2000) argues, due to the lack of exits for capital under such monolithic arrangements, “A world without borders is a world without exits. We need exits.” In other words, capital needs a federated neoliberalism in Greve’s view. On exits, Albert Hirschman agrees in part because they signal failings powerfully. Sunstein (2019) cites the need to opt-out, another form of exit, as imperative to freedom. On the other hand, the left-leaning New America seems to pivot towards a more seamless global economic system, mobilizing capital under a “Bretton Woods II” by combining blockchain technology with “impact investments” (New America, 2019).

Nevertheless, a world market for think tanks bring increased competition to specialize, focusing on geographic regions, political topics, or ideologically leanings. This also gives donors opportunities to narrowly tailor their gifts, while simultaneously convoluting attempts at rankings and the need for improved definitions (Lopez, 2013).

Foreign investment has complicated the tax-exempt status and traditional roles of domestic think tanks, allowing manipulation toward foreign goals. On the other hand, emerging markets have been ripe for the development of globally-focused think tanks, like the MPS, and global leaders with international experience are brought on to lead domestic think tanks hoping to expand transnationally. With the revolving door and interlocks between government, business, media, and academia, as well as the interconnectedness within think tanks, foreign influence and international interest are likely to spread. These revolutions are not entirely inevitable but they also bring the importance of transparency to the forefront of think tank's role in policy making.

### **Lies My Think Tank Told Me**

The political landscape creates opportunity for predatory behavior in think tanks masquerading as experts of the enlightenment. The Brookings Institution hosted a panel of prominent think tank directors in January entitled “Why Facts and Think Tanks Matter” (Brookings Institution, 2019). Panelist Paolo Magri, director of the Italian Institution for International Policy Studies, is warning when he says he “has one fear... building up fake think tanks — not fake news, fake think tanks — is extremely easy because there is a wide and broad definition of think tanks”, particularly when

authoritarian regimes focus on idea dissemination in order to bolster and continue their policies with an air of credibility. The concern of fake think tanks deserves further attention as it is their products and services which most clearly attract this classification and threaten liberal democracies. What do fake think tanks do?

Publishing, for instance, is a fundamental component to each think tank impacted by the political and media landscapes. A new think tank, the Center for Global Research Development for example, is publishing several journals in already crowded fields with what have since been found to be copied titles by other publishers (Brezgov, 2019). Others have accepted machine-generated submissions, like the American Research Institute for Policy Development's publishing of "Robots No Longer Considered Harmful" by I.P. Freely, Jacques Strap, and Oliver Clothesoff. Exposing the prevalence of these journals, Jeffrey Beall (2019) published a list for many years (including the two mentioned above) with hundreds of predatory publishers and journals that often charge for publication yet provide no review. Some include "Social Science Journals", "Academic Research Journals", "Journal of Comprehensive Research", the "Institute of Doctors, Engineers, and Scientists" and so on.

Some manufacture predatory academic conferences as well. Founded in 1997 by the DC-based 501(c)3 Center for Public Integrity, the International Consortium for Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) is widely known for the Panama Papers, attracting the Pulitzer Prize for its exposé. In a lesser known investigation into "fake science", the ICIJ reports "bogus" conferences, like those organized by the World Academy of Science, Engineering, and Technology (WASET) are held in addition to creating predatory

journals (Alecci, 2018a). Some simply charge a fee to be published in their scientific journal. Others “are beyond being for-profit or commercialized. They basically aim to rip off those researchers who are academically poor” by charging participation fees to speakers. At the end of the day, hundreds of thousands of scientists have published studies in journals that lack the traditional peer-review checks for accuracy and quality, while publishing requirements have only become increasingly dire (Flaherty, 2019). “In Germany alone, more than 5,000 scientists — including those supported by public funding — have published their articles in such predatory journals, which have been increasing for the past five years”, according to Alecci (2018b). On the other hand, perhaps more alarming is the extent to which ambitious experts will go to meet this supply. Hvistendahl (2013) explains how Chinese academic hopefuls will bribe for writing credits or plagiarize journal articles in an extreme example of the quip “publish or perish.”

The International Life Science Institute (ILSI) exhibits the hallmarks of predation. ILSI was created by Coca Cola 40 years ago and has become a global think tank that publishes *Nutrition Reviews*, holds seminars and conferences, and assists governments (Jacobs, 2019). Funded by hundreds of corporations including PepsiCo and General Mills, and formerly Mars, which withdrew support last year for ILSI’s “advocacy-led studies.” But not before the World Health Organization criticized and then barred the organization from involvement setting food and water standards in 2006 when evidence of their stealth political support to industry came forward. Further expulsions from the WHO followed in 2015 but ILSI has been active in India, delaying the use of red warning labels for unhealthy items out of ardent concern for sales.



Distinguished scholar of the Brookings Institution Dr. Robert Litan spoke to Congress in 2015 as a “non-resident senior fellow” about the kickbacks financial advisors receive for steering clients to higher-priced annuities and investments. While the Department of Labor reported this policy to cost American consumers \$17 billion a year and thus the DoL attempted to curb the practice, Dr. Litan presented to Congress his report stating the abolishment of advisor kickbacks would actually cost the American consumer up to \$80 billion (Warren, 2017)—a swing of up to \$97 billion. As it turns out, the independent expert had received funding from an investment service company, Capital Group, and after the public was made aware of Dr. Litan’s economic conflicts of interests and exposed his corporate funders, he resigned from the prestigious Brookings Institution. And Brookings would later amend their rules on conflicts of interests (Hamburger, 2015). Ten years prior, Dr. Litan had been ranked one of the top two, “high-quality” economic scholars at leading economic think tanks in *The International Economy* (Trimbath, 2005); Litan has since been invited to join memberships of the Council on Foreign Relations and focuses on the rising concerns of “growing labor shortages” as companies struggle to fill jobs (Alden & Litan, 2017). In another example, the Atlantic Council offers a speaking opportunity to executives “with top U.S. and foreign leaders’ present” if a minimum \$50,000 donation materializes; with \$100,000 a donor will ascend from the “Chairman’s circle” to the “Global Leadership Circle” and be allowed to request one private roundtable meeting with experts towards company needs and rotation of company logo on its website (New York Times, 2016).

Result-oriented donors commoditize the think tank environment and lead some to stretch the rules of political warfare, by selling predetermined rankings, services, and fellowship positions instead of leveraging sound ideas for shared social welfare. Brookings provided a tiered system, a menu or rubric of what contributions would purchase, like a private assessment, public validation, including titles at Brookings and so on, which “read like a fee-for-service agreement” to potential donors (Lipton & Williams, 2016). These activities blur the lines between credible think tanks in the pursuit of truth and their more predatory cousins. This type of conflation seems more systemic than the activities of a rogue researcher, and belies the tax-supported accountability to the public. In this view, think tanks have abandoned the neutral tendencies of eminent educators and publicly spirited citizens and replaced them with predatory science.

## **Media landscape and the online giants**

In *The Imperial Presidency* the founders “nourished”, Schlesinger writes, “the principle of disclosure”, favoring the check that a widely informed public could provide an ailing democracy. Walter Lippmann, in *Public Opinion*, explains that we inform ourselves about politics from the media, and media evolves in its form, like the telegram, print, radio, television, internet, and social media giving it mass, learning effects. With its powers to inform the public and investigate, vital to democracy, the media is viewed as a “fourth branch” of government, enshrined in the first amendment, yet existing outside of government (Cater, 1959). Joseph Pulitzer once said “our Republic and its press will rise or fall together” if only to show the interwoven nature of information to a public-spirited citizenry. However, regardless of the number of pages, air time, or screen size,

the totality of bits of news in one day cannot be covered. Therefore, the news media have not only an informative and educative role but an inherently propagandistic and persuasive role; not only has information dissemination been democratized by the internet but is also unprecedented in market concentration; not only has the media expanded to provide up-to-the-minute and live updates but has reduced reporting to a tweet or Facebook post, delivered via self-selection and programmatic algorithms — sometimes at the request of Congress, the President, or agencies like the U.S. Census Bureau (Brown, 2019).

On one hand, voluminous amounts of data distort credible information from the incredible; rather, the problem is identifying actionable intelligence. On the other, name recognition no longer requires the use of few, select pathways to the public. The internet broadened the path to the public with a webpage; social media has further broadened those pathways creating a networked society (Castells, 2009). President Trump, for example, has a megaphone to over 67 million followers via his Twitter account, a modern, 24-hour, fireside chat where the people can chat back. For example, “the undisputed frontrunner in free mainstream coverage” was President Trump, particularly with his use of old media in new ways (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 58). The traditional Republican elite were sidestepped, no doubt in part by the nearly \$2 billion in free media coverage Trump received. In one study, Hillary Clinton, by comparison, was mentioned half as often as Trump on CNN, MSNBC, CBS, and NBC Twitter accounts.

Twitter's impact unfolds in real-time, as Ret. Rear Admiral John Kirby juxtaposes the very real effects of "Twitter diplomacy" in the brinksmanship of US-Iran relations. It is not unusual to use back channels and formal channels of communication, adding Twitter as a third, "front channel" of communication for its public facing transparency but also its real-time application by both President Trump and Iran's foreign minister, for example, de-escalating tensions after trading blows incited by U.S. aggression (Kirby, 2020). This front channel of social media undercuts the temporal gap from newsworthy event to print publication, and allows other policy actors (relatively) unfiltered exposure to the public and donors.

According to Robert Hutchins, the concentration of media is "one of three factors threatening freedom of the press" and with it the avenues to inform people of diverse views (Baker, 2006). Five major conglomerates are horizontally and vertically integrated controlling most of mainstream media. This is from fifty in 1983, twenty-three in 1990, and ten in 1997 (Bagdikian, 2004). On the other hand, by comparison to other industries in the economy it appears not as concentrated (Compaine & Gomery, 2000). The level of concentration is, in part, distorted by what industries are included, for example, newspapers, magazines, film studios, radio, television networks, satellite networks, software companies, and so on. One recent study put 80 percent of global media revenue in the hands of ten firms (Winseck, 2011).

As a result of increasing concentration in the industry, corrupt market tactics, like market power to control demand, reduce competition, and increase barriers to entry for potential competitors are produced (Curran, 2002). In addition, the traditional

protections between media and corporate advertisers withers, and news coverage is adapted to protect other business holdings (Horwitz, 2005). Think tanks, therefore, must establish relationships with fewer media outlets and be alert of potential harm to other business holdings in order to reach the larger public, potential donors, and policy makers; or they establish their own outlets and engage in the political conversation before news cycles end and policy windows tighten, increasing the risk of more negligent products.

While the internet ameliorates the gatekeeping concentration, social media may exacerbate it. As a tool of information dissemination and thus a vital component to how we orient ourselves in this world, the internet and social media can be used by optimists to aid and stabilize liberal democracies (Shirky, 2008) or by skeptics as a tool to divide them (Sunstein, 2017a). While Shirky praises the transition from one-to-many to many-to-many communication in new forms of media, Sunstein argues social media algorithms aided by your input construct a “daily me” newsfeed, heightening polarization with digital echo chambers that nudge users in ways most people are unaware of.

Social media is also characterized by concentration. Facebook, Apple, Google, Microsoft, and Amazon have a combined revenue stream of \$800 billion, rivaling the GDP of major nations. As conglomerates in monosopnistic positions, Amazon captures one of every two dollars spent online for example. More specifically in the news, 93 percent of Americans get their news online, and two-thirds of Americans use social media for news (Lynn, 2018). The average American spends roughly 12 hours a day with media; in 1960

it was 5 hours. This attracts the ad dollars. The Internet Advertising Bureau show 99 percent of all *new* advertising dollars is acquired by Google and Facebook (Ingram, 2017), a pair that nearly possess 60 percent of all digital advertising. Google and Facebook's annual profits from advertising rose, reaching \$96 and \$55 billion respectively (Desjardins, 2019), at the same time newspaper revenue has fallen from \$50 billion in 2005 to less than \$20 billion. A news desert now prevails across the country despite a plethora of websites because the journalistic food chain begins with the papers. And 2000 of the 3143 U.S. counties no longer receive a daily newspaper according to Knight chair in journalism and media economics at UNC, Penelope Abernathy (Stites, 2018); Pittsburgh recently became the first mid-sized city without one. Now, Google and Facebook are responsible for 48 percent of ad revenue in local markets—this lead former FCC director Tom Wheeler to argue Facebook knows more about local customers than local businesses (The Current, a Brookings Podcast, 5.10.2019). Twitter, more specifically, surpassed Facebook in 2017 with a higher percentage of users who use the platform as a source of news (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). While Facebook's scale means more Americans still receive their news on its platform, the surge in news activity is on Twitter's platform.

The distinction between propaganda and education in news is worth considering. Media can be both. Propaganda has evolved from a nationalistic conception used in the disinformation campaigns of World War I, to a more individualistic one, both relying on asymmetries of information (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002). Communication used to persuade the recipient is deemed propaganda, while that which is to inform and allow the recipient to exercise critical judgement and may conclude with contrary opinions is

education. At the same time, importantly, not all persuasion is propaganda. Therefore, think tanks more interested in policy-based evidence than evidenced-based policy become propagandistic.

The debate between propaganda and education revolves around freedom of choice but the persuasive aspect cannot be wholly removed, even from the most well-intentioned expert. From the supply-side, if an editor tried to submit no influence at all nudging is still inevitable. Unforeseen influence will occur. Moreover, when print media attempt to use opposing scholarly views in order to appear non- or bi-partisan, they foster the perception of an even debate that is not always evenhanded nor itself free from bias. The increasing references to partisan think tanks increase both proportionally, educative research as well as propaganda, according to a pair of RAND scholars (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). The media, therefore, is not above scrutiny in a liberal democracy, nor entirely educative. The asymmetry of information in the news is the first sign of propaganda, Lippmann (1922/1998) argues:

*In order to conduct propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks wise or desirable. For while people who have direct access can misconceive what they see, no one else can decide how they shall misconceive it, unless he can decide where they shall look, and at what.*

This was a useful tool, according to Lippmann (1922/1998, pp. 248, 310) the “common interests very largely elude public opinion” such that a “specialized class” of responsible experts must “manufacture consent.” Harold Lasswell (1933), for his part, agreed with the more propagandistic function of the media.

The new forms of media permit similar barriers, and create enhanced opportunities for political and economic predictions. Harvard business professor emeritus Shoshana Zuboff states, “asymmetries of knowledge and power are essential to the means of behavioral modification.” Online Giants restructure how information is shared and revolutionize the market, argues Zuboff (2019), such that the “war of extraction” has commenced. In other words, you’ve ceased to be the customer and you’re no longer the product; you are the mine. Whomever can render the most information (by keeping the attention of users) to effectively nudge *and* predict human activity in a “behavioral futures market” will reign. Aided by the internet of things and constant connectivity, these newly dubbed “surveillance capitalists” are liquefying the physical world, according to an IBM report (Lougee & Pureswaran, 2015). Meanwhile, the implications of seemingly addictive social media use are only beginning to be understood (Alter, 2017). More politicized think tanks often produce captivating material framed in a pseudo-environment, particularly in order to be prioritized in social media’s algorithmic news feeds that relies on timely, sensational products.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the preponderance

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<sup>9</sup> Though, in April of 2019, there is some research that allege algorithms have been reprogrammed to direct viewers’ recommended news feed — 70% of youtube viewing time is from recommended videos — to more general-interest clips in corporate media, like MSNBC, CNN, and especially FOX (Ledwich, 2019)(Pakman, 2019).



of live news accounts and cycles put pressure on think tanks to engage while the iron is still hot, with politicizing results.

The role of the media from the supply-side argument is a predictive role. This prophetic power influences the agenda of the political process. It is the strategy of influencing the agenda that compels think tanks to engage, heavily by some, with the media in all its forms. Walter Lippmann states how the media predicts the economy, potentially creating self-fulfilling prophecies. This has certainly shown to be true for IPO share prices (Pollock & Rindova, 2003); and true in education where a paltry 1.4 percent of national media coverage leads to an equally dismal level of public understanding in education policy and issues (West, Whitehurst, & Dionne Jr., 2009). In another study using frequency of articles, five pieces per month on inflation and eleven per month on unemployment boost public concern by one percent. This acknowledges the agenda-setting function, particularly as it influences independents and the politically uninvolved the most (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Public opinion *of* representatives, which think tanks wish to influence, is particularly impressionable to such media lobbying; as McCombs (2004) notes, “there is considerable evidence that the shifting salience of issues on the media agenda often are the basis for public opinion about the overall performance in office of a public leader.” Think tanks, in this view, seek to tap into these political streams to steer the narrative where possible.

While Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1940s and 50s made convincing arguments regarding the “minimal effects” of the media on public opinion, a polarized media has been shown to lead to a more polar nation, with major effects (Zaller, 1992). Though partisan media finds fewer but more politically knowledgeable viewers, extreme programming produces more extreme beliefs (Levendusky, 2013). And yet, much of the extreme still makes its way to the mainstream. Partisan voices on cable networks like MSNBC and Fox may still have significantly less viewership than their mainstream cousins, but they receive significantly more discussion in print and other outlets *for* their extreme claims, especially high-profile conservatives like Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity (Taylor, 2017).

One study from the 2008 election on viewers of partisan news outlets (MSNBC and FOX) reveals significant effects on viewer attitudes towards the oppositional candidate (Smith & Searles, 2014). Another study finds from 1996 to 2000 — when Rupert Murdoch established the twenty-four-hour Fox News Channel — towns which broadcast Fox News saw an increase of Republican vote share (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007).

A critical view seems to be in demand for either party. For Carter and Reagan in 1980, 25 percent of presidential campaign news coverage was negative. However, by 2000, the negative coverage surpassed 60 percent, paralleling a lack of trust in politicians and government over the same time (Schudson, 2003). In Schudson’s view, increasingly critical coverage has at least led to a more cynical public.

In meta-analyses on the relationship between news media exposure and voting, researchers found a strong relationship between newspaper reading and voting

(Hollander, 2007). However, this is less generalized with TV (Miron & Bryant, 2007). Of course, on the whole, research would be better served if the media's agenda and public's agenda could be untethered but this is difficult with regards to data.

A recent European study has shown in four parliamentary states “the mass media to be one of the key political agenda setters directly competing with the Prime Minister and the powerful political parties” (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011, p. 295). It is in this regard that the fourth branch fulfills its namesake.

Another key factor associated with higher degrees of media visibility relates to the “personal networks and editorial judgments (or biases) of newspaper reporters and editors.” In this case, proximity again plays an important role by making it easier to build networks that link social scientists, journalists, and policymakers' staffs. As they do in obtaining funding, conservative think tanks appear to fare better in obtaining mentions in the media, being cited nearly one and half times as frequently as those with no discernible ideology (Rich, 2004). The *Washington Times* and *Wall Street Journal* were found to favor conservative think tanks, whereas the *New York Times* was more likely to mention think tanks with no discernible ideology, “even after controlling for budget size.”

Using regression analysis, Rich and Weaver (2000) examine the factors that are related to media visibility within a sample of 51 public policy think tanks in six national newspapers from 1991 to 1998. One key factor is, unsurprisingly, funding: well-funded think tanks excel at gaining visibility and spreading their ideas, which, in turn, “attracts additional funding,” creating a cyclical effect. Another study by Abelson (2002) corroborates the

correlations between funding and visibility by examining television appearances by think-tank scholars on ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN; well-resourced think tanks like Brookings, CEIP, AEI, and Heritage had the most evening news citations, the study found.

Social media's newfound predictive power using unforeseen barriers is just being explored. An article in *Nature* argues Facebook was able to nudge 340,000 voters into action on election day in 2010, 60,000 from one group with an informative message about election day and 280,000 from a second group with the message and portraits of six friends who voted, revealing the "contagion effect" (Bond, et al., 2012). But there are many new tools to predict behavior through the use of pseudo-environments. On election day in 2018, Google implemented a campaign of vote manipulation against Republicans using several tools like the "Search Engine Manipulation Effect", argues Epstein (2019) in a Senate Judiciary hearing. Moreover, under such algorithmic manipulations and self-selective echo chambers, a "false consensus" pervades the public leaving the user with the erroneous perception of an idea held widely across the polity, giving it misplaced weight and greater impetus than what is actual (Wiesner, et al., 2018).

Think tanks may have an active presence with Online Giants but these giants are also active in think tanks. Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, for example, became directly engaged when in 2013 he became chairman of the board at New America alongside a one-million-dollar donation in the same year. Other million dollar donations came from the U.S. Government via the State department, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation; Google was in the next tier of donors (over \$500,000).

Schmidt would eventually step down from New America in 2016 after seventeen years on the board.

With Larry Page at the helm of Google after Schmidt's departure in 2011, Google began to fund conservative and anti-statist think tanks that seek to diminish the role of government. The Center for Democracy and Media's investigative report, "the Googlization of the Far Right" listed the recipients, including ALEC, Cato Institute, Federalist Society, Americans for Tax Reform, and Heritage Action (Surgey, 2013). Importantly, this information is a voluntary submission as corporate disclosure of donations to the public is not mandatory and may be in line with Google's motto at the time of "don't be evil" but at the same time it is estimated that more than \$33 billion dollars is kept offshore, avoiding taxes (U.S. PIRG, 2013). On the other hand, in action Google appears to lean to the left in a study over a ten-day span prior to (and including) the 2018 November election, leading researchers to allege manipulation from the first keystroke (Epstein & Williams, 2019).

Facebook too has found cause to support, and seek expertise from, think tanks. In what has been called an "election partnership," Facebook has invested with the Atlantic Council, a think tank which focuses on international affairs, defense, and military analysis in support of NATO members. In this case, ostensibly, the partnership is out of concern for election tampering on Facebook's platform (Harbath, 2018).

Levitsky and Ziblatt contend Republican leadership structure is eviscerated by influential right-wing media; but conservatives are not alone (Persily, 2017). The new

media landscape creates windows of opportunity for the healthy democratization of information, and also framed analysis and propaganda. This evolving media landscape is navigated, and its prophetic power exploited, by think tanks, often creating negligent products at the expense of rigor. With the aid of clandestine social media algorithms, the dominant Online Giants have become covert gatekeepers to the public at large, putting a caveat on Castells networked society with the uncertainty of private algorithms. The activity of think tanks in this medium is, therefore, worth adding for analysis.

### **Acting swiftly**

Meanwhile, as the complexity of policy making expands to match the global scale, the pressure to respond with sensational alacrity in the news cycle wedges think tanks into a position of negligence, relying on habits, assumptions, heuristics, and patterns of behavior, increasing the likelihood of bias (Schudson, 2003).

Think tanks that wish to make the news cycle risk being negligent in their sensational claims such as in the Khashoggi scenario, distancing them from a more rigorous standard. Similarly, the Heritage Foundation produces 'bulletins' and 'backgrounders' in one or two months by the hundreds but was capable of surfacing them on pressing matters within days (Ricci, 1993). Flash reports, policy memos, and non-reviewed journals have become more common in the fast-paced, results-oriented political landscape (Weaver, 1989) As producers of flash reporting with reduced review, think tanks too have become result-oriented in the short-term at the expense of the long-term or medium-term.

Peer review and academic discussion was sacrificed in order to enter radical ideas in policy debates. Soley (1992) reports that the academic journals from partisan think tanks lack the *peer review* process that give other journals their veneration. The production of conservative journals with names similar to legitimate journals is intentional, Soley argues, *Public Opinion* by AEI is not the admired *Public Opinion Quarterly*; the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review* is not to be confused with *Policy Sciences* published by Springer for the Society of Policy Scientists, a nonprofit inspired by Harold Lasswell.

On the other hand, this timely advice cemented a new bridge between politics and expertise and helped breach the iron triangles of the past. In addition, McGann (2016, p. 167) states new media forms are “redefining how think tanks operate”, more specifically that information comes at the “right time.” The desired speed at which reports should be made is further met with the aforementioned television and radio stations, podcasts, and Twitter accounts.

Negligence is also at hand when Emily Tisch Sussman, credentialed as former vice-president of campaigns for the Center for American Progress, comes on MSNBC in strong support of presidential candidate Warren for 2020 when compared to Sanders: “to vote for Sanders over Warren is sexist”, Sussman (2019) alleges, because Warren has more detailed plans and her plans have evolved, meaning changed. Though they framed Sussman as a political strategist from CAP, she is also the heiress to real estate billionaire Laurie Tisch and daughter to Donald Sussman, founder of Paloma Funds, and Warren's wealth tax puts less burden on the wealthy. Moreover, the evidence of

sexism appears lacking in the brevity of a television critique. In this case, the time and space create a pseudo-environment that allows for a more propagandistic message, neither fake nor rigorously produced. The modern corollary is, for example, Twitter where the creator has more autonomy over the framing and message, without having to step through corporate media's gate.

Meanwhile, the "slow" perspective encourages "us to challenge our assumptions about media choices, to look beyond celerity, and to imagine alternatives that enhance both sustainability and free will" (Rauch, 2018, p. 125). As opposed to being lazy, slow, or a return to lost better times, the perspective dictates a more focused and mindful approach to media use, but also as an approach for experts and scholars in academia. While globalization, policies, and everyday life make actions more complex and impactful, the imperative for experts is to increase their response time under such urgency. When often the best course of action involves a return to the present in a meaningful way, with care and attention (Berg & Seeber, 2016), while studies show academics (78%) are burdened by physical and mental stress at higher rates than the general population "no matter how hard they work, they can't get everything done", including CEOs (48%).

### **Predators, partisans, and the principles**

Think tanks subject to the pressures of the political landscape risk becoming more predatory in order to attract donors or support prejudices, and think tanks subject to the pressures in the media landscape risk becoming more negligent from swift policy windows, pressuring experts to rely on habits and heuristics. Predatory and negligent think tanks have abandoned the purpose of science and central tenet of enlightened



thinking: consensus building in a rigorous pursuit of truth, discerning better ideas from worse.

The tendency to capitalize on science was forewarned by De Solla Price (1963) in *Big Science, Little Science*, where science, brimming from industrialization, expands and grows, eventually saturating the scientific market. After government and corporate funding dries up, a *crisis of quality* would ensue. More blame should be placed for the crisis of legitimacy in science on the experts themselves, according to Sarewitz (2000), because of a surplus of information on either side of a debate, as if to cancel one another out — a surfeit of expertise. Ravetz (1971) suggests an epistemological issue where science is relied on too heavily as a form of knowing, when he warns of the “folk science” of the educated classes, “derived from 17<sup>th</sup> century revolution in philosophy...a basic faith in the methods and results in the successful natural sciences, as a means to the solution of the deepest practical problems” (p.387). The emergent experts are, then, heavily capitalized. The privatization and commodification of social sciences, has re-gearred the practice into tools, intellectual-backed content in the knowledge economy to the highest bidder (Mirowski, 2011). Thus, not only think tanks but science generally as a trusted and credible field suffers and simultaneously struggles to pivot outward to innovative solutions.

The track record of expert prognostication puts *quality* in high demand. Experts’ ability to read the situation and forecast from the social sciences is significant only in its insignificance next to Jane Q. Public (Tetlock, 2005). In 2010, for example, Nobel prize winner Robert Solow is on record in a rare congressional hearing on such economic

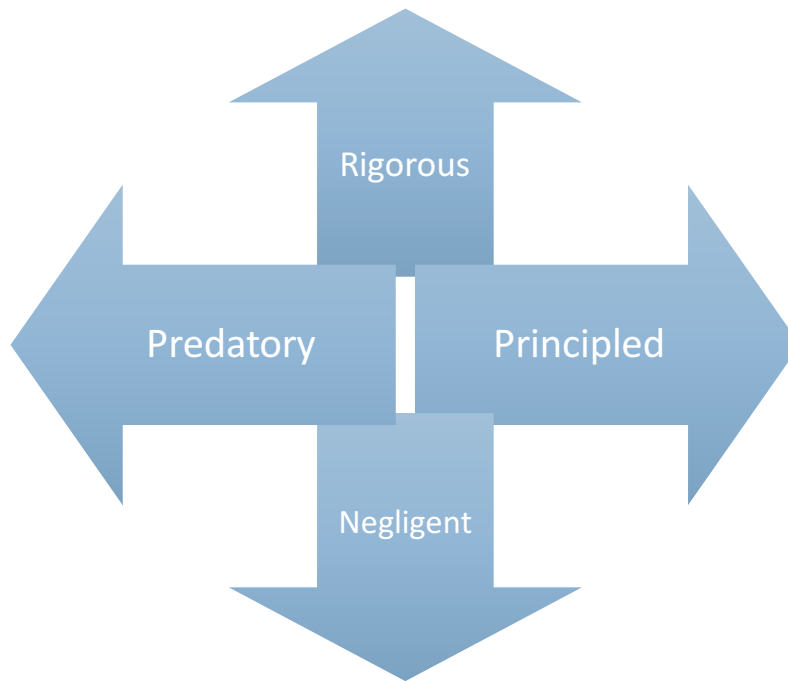
failures, specifically on dynamic stochastic general models and how these economic tools were failures in predicting the Great Recession (Mirowski, 2011). Likewise, political scientists suffer similar shortcomings of theory and practice. Green and Shapiro (1994) state after reviewing rational choice theories from the most “formidable” and “widely-regarded” literatures built on Arrow, Downs, and Olson:

*literatures on voter turnout, collective action, legislative behavior, and electoral competition reveal that the empirical contributions of rational choice theory in these fields are few, far between, and considerably more modest than the combination of mystique and methodological fanfare surrounding the rational choice movement would lead one to expect” (p.179).*

Frederick Hayek, founder of the modern neoliberal thought collective, in his 1974 memorial Nobel Prize in Economics acceptance speech, decried the objectivity claimed in economics as “scientific”, due to inescapable uncertainty (Hayek, 1974). Hayek shared the Nobel prize with economist Gunnar Myrdal who despite ideological differences as the only NPW who advocated for Social Democracy also shared his caution of the veracity of science based on the whims of human behavior (Offer & Söderberg, 2016). Their concerted warning supplants perfectly to policy problems, which are inherently “wicked” to solve (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Science is no more than a special kind of social arrangement to understand the world around us and come to a rational consensus, followed by two overarching concerns, according to Daniel Bell (1973): will there be a rationalization of science, a policy for science? And will scientists be on top or on tap?

Philip Tetlock fears the marketplace of ideas is imperfect, without intervention, for political judgement and prognostication for at least three reasons. First, competition is futile if consumers are unmotivated to make critical judgement, leading to reliance on low-effort heuristics. Second, consumers may have the “wrong” motives. In other words, consumers are looking to bolster their prejudices as opposed to a “dispassionate pursuit of truth.” Like-minded consumers adopt in-group mentality similar to distinguishing teams as in a “sports arena” instead of the meeting room. Lastly, there are “cognitive” and “task difficulty” constraints on even the motivated consumer. Partisans may offer any number of vague counterfactuals to a better outcome that at the end of the day cannot be falsified. These imperfections give a wide berth to think tanks. These conditions are impacted by the political landscape and media landscape I have described above. It will help us to understand the impacts by placing think tanks on a grid with two axes. The political landscape exerts pressure on think tanks, compelling them toward either *predatory* behavior on the one hand and *principled* on the other. Similarly, the media landscape compels think tanks to either *negligent* behavior on one hand and *rigorous* methods on the other (see Figure 5).

***Figure 3. 3: A visual of the pressures from the political and media landscape***



Non-peer-reviewed content can impart negligence due to hasty attempts to enter the political debate, or predation from advocacy-led support to prejudices, particularly when found in think tank leaders. Edwin Feulner, Jr. was unpublished in any of the 1,000 social science journals after 25 years despite his founding and status as president of the Heritage Foundation, according to Soley (1992). Nor had the director of research, Burton Yale Pines, or the “Salvatori Fellow in Soviet Studies” Dr. Leon Aron. In Soley’s research from 1976-1980 the only academic publication from Heritage is a letter to a journal editor. For Heritage, credibility followed its proximity to power in the Reagan administration, highlighting an alternative path to policy success. Perhaps worse, then, is the extent to which reviewed content can be trusted.

From the extreme actions of predatory journals, well-intentioned experts may simply utilize poor principles or rigor. A journal editor’s ability to catch errors is not wholly

reassuring, for instance. Smaldino and McElreath (2016) argue the allure of bold, creative contributions over replication studies may increase the frequency of publishing fallacious results. Moreover, principled experts diving into their field run the risk of hitting these academic pitfalls. As research in the communication of science shows, trust in science and knowledge are not tethered; on the contrary, becoming an expert in a topic can lead to increased skepticism regarding scientific claims (Simis, Madden, Cacciatore, & Yeo, 2016).

#### *Science of Doubt*

Ioannidis (2014), of the Meta-Research Innovation Center at Stanford, estimates 85% of research resources are wasted because of exaggerated or false findings—which should be alarming considering the billions committed to research from public and private funding. This is particularly true in fields “that have to-date been too lenient”, he argues, like epidemiology, psychology (Simmons JP, 2011), or economics (Stiglitz, 2010). Moreover, the replication failures in science are well documented in psychology and particularly in the failures of economics (Nuzzo, 2016). Principled science, at minimum, must be gauged in quality, which after review includes empirical tests. After all, hopes of agreement aside, who is expert enough to know the future? Yet it is the future that must be judged, comparing one policy to another, tolerating less than perfect knowledge.

Peer review is an information check for the public but also for other experts trying to filter the credible from the incredible. Retractionwatch.com keeps a running catalogue of articles pulled by publishers. Sage Publishing, for example, pulled 22 articles in mid-September from their *International Journal of Damage Mechanics* and *Journal of*

*Composite Materials*. Retractiondatabase.org, a sister website, maintains a catalogue of retractions, open to the public. In 2000, thirty out of one million journal articles across disciplines were retracted, but in 2016 there were over 1300 out of nearly two million articles retracted. In other words, at the same time total articles published double, the number of retractions ascend forty-fold (Oransky, 2017). When it comes to the retraction leaderboard, it is clear men are far guiltier of fraud than women. When it comes to impact factor, other issues with the factor aside, the higher the impact factor the higher the number of retractions. And then notifying the public is troublesome, “journals often fail to alert the naïve reader; 31.8% of retracted papers were not noted as retracted in any way” (Steen, 2011).

Brian Nosek of UVA was part of the “Reproducibility Project” published in *Science* (Open Science Collaboration, 2015), in which scholars replicated 100 psychology experiments, 97 of which have significant results. The repeated experiments, in turn, found only 36 experiments with significant results leading one scholar to comment “if 36 percent of replications are getting statistically significant results, it is not at all clear what the number *should* be” (Yong, 2015). This is not to say “evidence-based policy” is fundamentally unobtainable but, rather, “policy-based evidence” and statistical errors have made the predicament of science grave (Benessia, et al., 2016). Moreover, as sound bites and tweets take precedent as a sources of news, how will think tanks counter-balance the short-term nature that incentivizes “policy-based evidence?”

Agencies with hopes of bringing principles to science have since been created but are few. The reproducibilityinitiative.org aims to identify and reward principled science

with “independently validated” badges. However, access to data can be hard at times (Van Noorden, 2015).

Building a consensus, in part, means bringing in those from without. Women, for example, occupy less than 15 percent of the leadership role in think tanks, and Women’s research in think tanks is less read and circulated on Twitter (Manzano & Sanchez-Giménez, 2019). This indicates that the scholarly interests of women are not being addressed equally. The media hastens the opening and closing of policy windows which is why a slow approach to fast media has been beckoning (Rauch, 2018, p. 33). Some media outlets like *Delayed Gratification* specifically avoid the story of the day, preferring to let the dust settle and report more comprehensively and rigorously on the news of the past quarter. In this way, “delayed news becomes an asset, not an oxymoron.” While not all policy situations will allow for such luxuries, it is important to avoid negligent mistakes in the media for the more rigorous standards science demands.

Public opinion, meanwhile, reveals a slight uptick in the role experts should play in policy debates over the past four years but is much stronger in those with high science knowledge and among Democrats (Funk, Hefferon, Kennedy, & Johnson, 2019).

Republicans see expert decisions as no better than the average person 66 percent of the time, while 45 percent of Democrats feel the same. Going further Republicans believe the scientific method produces accurate conclusions 55 percent of the time, whereas 70 percent of Democrats trust the scientific method. What is pivotal to public trust in experts is whether the data is open to the public, or funded by industry.





## **CH. 4 Methodology**

Using publicly accessible tax, media, and congressional data, this proposed study assesses the extent to which media visibility and political partisanship explain the influence of elite modern think tanks. First, I identify which think tanks are the authorities, the experts as policy makers see them, as measured by interactions with policymakers (e.g., requests to testify at congressional committees) (Abelson, 2002; Rich & Weaver, 2000). I then use DW-Nominate scores of legislators in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress to calculate partisanship scores for the think tanks in my sample, adapted from Groseclose and Milyo (2005). Finally, I perform multiple regression analysis to assess to what extent this first measure of authority is associated with think-tank media exposure (e.g., mentions in major news sources, social media metrics, industry surveys) and political partisanship.

### **Quantitative Analyses**

#### *Sample*

My nonprobability sample of think tanks is purposefully selected by identifying the think tanks most frequently invited to give testimonies and in the literature (see Table 4.1). In addition, relying on the extensive work done by James McGann, I will add a few think tanks to create an evenly distributed sample by partisanship. For the past ten years, McGann has conducted an annual ranking of the top think tanks in the U.S., one that is widely used by scholars as well as organizations like thinktankwatch.com. McGann's method involves surveys of thousands of institutions and scholars in which respondents rank think tanks based on a wide range of criteria. While some scholars (e.g., Shoup, 2015) disagree with McGann's conclusions about the "top" think tanks, the GGTTI provides me with a list of think tanks that will supplement my sample for other kinds of

assessments—specifically, measures of political authority by congressional testimony, media visibility by mentions in selected news outlets, and political partisanship by policy positions.

**Table 4. 1: Sample of Think Tanks**

<b>Think Tank</b>	
American Enterprise Institute	Heritage Foundation
Atlantic Council	Hoover Institution
Baker Institute	Hudson Institute
Belfer Center	Human Rights Watch
Brookings Institution	Institute for New Economic Thinking
Center for American Progress	Institute for Policy Studies
Cato Institute	Manhattan Institute
Center for Budget and Policy Priorities	Mercatus Center
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	National Bureau of Economic Research
Center for Economic and Policy Research	New America
Century Foundation	Open Markets Institute
Council on Foreign Relations	Peterson Institute for International Economics
Center for a New American Security	RAND Corporation
Center for Strategic and International Studies	Resources for the Future
Economic Policy Institute	Stimson Center
Foreign Policy Research Institute	Urban Institute
Freedom House	Washington Center for Equitable Growth
Woodrow Wilson Center	

*Time dimension*

The time dimension for this study is framed around the 115<sup>th</sup> Congresses (2017-2019). Validity issues include the differences in congressional activity during a lame-duck presidency versus during a new administration. As Light (1999) explains, the beginning of presidencies prove to be more productive despite inexperience, particularly with major reform (for example, Obama and health care or Trump and tax reform). Also, it should be noted that the Republican Party held majorities in both houses of Congress during this time period. This will have important implications for the findings as the majority party determines the congressional schedule.

*Think tank congressional testimonies (policy authority)*

The number of times that scholars from each think tank appear before congressional committees will be used as a measure of each think tank's degree of authority as seen by policymakers. Trimbath (2005) considers congressional testimonies to be the most direct way to assess influence: the agenda is influenced by the people who deliver testimony and ideas, fulfilling policymakers' needs for more specialized information. I will focus on appearances in hearings in the Senate and House. By comparison, Abelson (2006) focuses on the war in Iraq and the committees responsible for foreign and defense policy and thus, the testimony made in them between 2001-2006.

It is important to note that think tanks are able to exert influence in many ways other than testifying before Congress (Monbiot, 2011; Silverstein & Williams, 2013). Other methods include: holding public forums, conferences, and lectures; publishing books, articles, policy briefs, and journals; and using digital outlets like webpages, podcasts, and social media platforms to increase media exposure. Think tanks also engage in more private methods of influencing policy, such as serving on advisory boards, preparing studies for policymakers, and inviting policymakers to conferences. One of the most discreet but potent ways that think tanks shape policy involves what is commonly known as the "revolving door" (McGann, 2016)—when think tanks scholars accept government positions, or think tanks provide positions to former government officials.<sup>10</sup> Medvetz's

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<sup>10</sup> Brookings Institution Press was asked by this author to provide an appendix mentioned in McGann's (2016) *The Fifth Estate*. Its contents include data on the revolving door between think

unique interstitial field of think tanks is, perhaps, most epitomized through the use of the revolving door; indeed, policy influence may be at its zenith when think tank scholars become policymakers.

While these other forms of policy authority, or influence, are very real, they are often difficult to measure. Abelson (2006), Rich (2004), and Trimboth (2005) all use congressional testimonials as a direct indicator of policy influence and relevance. The approach taken in this study will follow Abelson (2006). Abelson tallies appearances before congressional think tanks by using materials from CQ Roll Call, the Library of Congress, and the U.S. Government Publishing Office. I will use the same data sources to determine the number of times personnel from those think tanks in the sample (as described above) testify before Congressional hearings in each year between 2017 and 2019 (115<sup>th</sup> Congress). This will generate a measure of *think tank congressional testimonies* (see figure 4.1).

#### *Think tank media visibility (X<sub>2</sub>)*

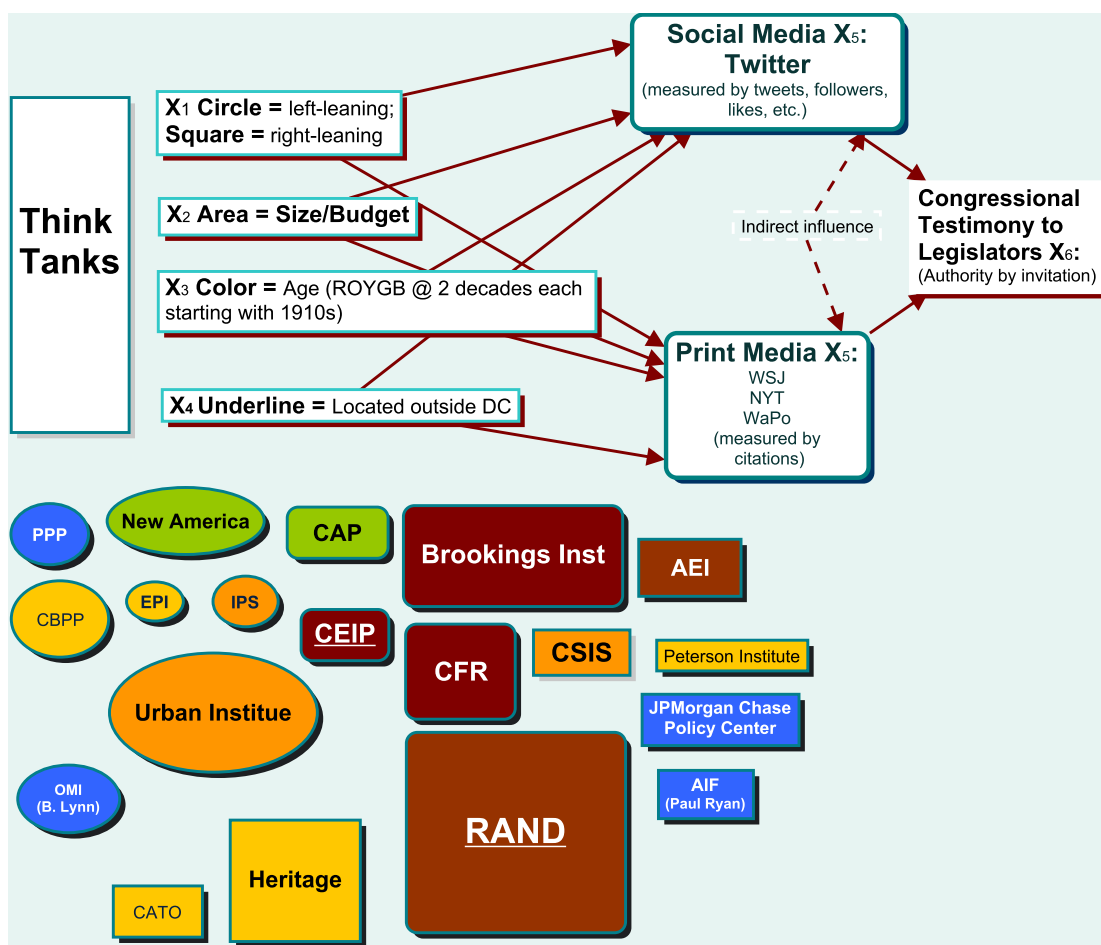
Rich and Weaver (2000) make the case that “the most readily available measure” of think tank media visibility is a tally of the number of institutional mentions in major news publications selected for their national circulation or being based in the nation’s capital. Specifically, they are the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and *USA Today*. Rich (2004), later,

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tanks and government but is unavailable. Future copies of the text are to include an errata slip as McGann stated “any mention of this appendix should have been removed.”

confines this sample to the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Both studies utilized this approach over a six-year period from 1991 to 1998. In a similar study of Canadian think tanks, Abelson (2002) added broadcast and radio media citations (CBC radio and CTV and CBC evening news).

**Figure 4. 1: Path Analysis of Project**



There are at least three limitations to this method that will favor existing relationships between publishers and think tanks. A journalist may reuse “sources of choice” out of efficiency as opposed to fostering new and diverse relationships. Geographically speaking, some institutions may cross paths with local news agencies more so than those, for

example, on the opposite coast. Lastly, some articles will mention a subject's prior affiliations even though they are no longer formally connected with the institution.

Despite these limitations, measuring think tank mentions in major media outlets gives us some sense of which think tanks are the most successful at disseminating their research via the mainstream media. I will calculate *think tank news media visibility* by determining the number of news articles that use think tank personnel as sources, including as authors of articles, references to academic studies, and references to academic commentary. The sample will include all articles published between 2015 and 2017 in three prominent national newspapers—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. As Cook (1989, p. 48) states by citing a network correspondent, one starts the day by reading [these] newspapers in order to “start out with an idea of the story of the day.” Tallies of media citations will exclude display ads, classified ads, stock quotes, and obituaries. These publications are chosen following Rich (2004). Moreover, while TV and Radio have certainly become more prominent in the dissemination of news with twenty-four-hour a day service, quantifying citations is complicated by the scattered context, the tendency to shift from topic to topic when stories over 120 seconds is considered “long” in TV and nearly outright long in Radio (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 120).

This measure of media visibility cannot determine if such media references are actually consumed by members of Congress. Furthermore, in today's media landscape, consumers of political news in general are more likely to find it through television and social media outlets rather than print publications. The decline of print readership is clear: in 1930 daily newspaper circulation averaged 1.3 newspapers per household; by 1970, the

circulation rate dropped to 1, and by 2003, the rate had fallen further to .5 (Sunstein, 2017a). The internet and social media platforms in particular are increasingly used for political news (Lynn, 2018).

To account for these trends, I will also tally think tank use of one prominent social media platform—Twitter with nearly 50 million monthly users in the US (Clement, 2019)—in terms of each organization’s number of tweets, retweets, “likes” their tweets receive, and the number of followers their accounts have. The analysis will encompass Twitter activity in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress. The resulting measure will allow me to assess *think tank social media visibility* for each think tank in my sample. Kleinberg (1999) argues the more hyperlinks the greater the source credibility of that information. Social media simplified this action with “retweets.” But it was the incursion of the “like” button, introduced in 2009, that became a massive source of behavioral data extraction, Zuboff (2019) argues. And ‘likes’ are coveted by think tanks. Zero ‘likes’ are not just “privately painful, but also a kind of public condemnation” (Alter, 2017). Here, it is important to note that the number of posts, retweets, or followers does not necessarily correspond to a given think tank’s object authority with readers, nor do the number of likes, or retweets, its posts receive indicate what is actually favorably viewed—the organization or the idea, for example.

*Regressing policy authority on media visibility ( $X_3$  as a function of  $X_2$ )*

Once these two measures of think tank media visibility have been calculated for all think tanks in my sample, I will analyze the relationship between these independent variables and my measure of policy authority, think tank congressional testimonies. I will first assess the direction and strength of the relationship by calculating a correlation

coefficient. I will then use a hierarchical linear model, or random effects, generalized least squares regression. A random effects model assumes that there is natural heterogeneity across subjects in their regression coefficients, which can be represented as a probability (Diggle, Heagerty, Liang, & Zeger, 2002). However, the difference in strength between ten media citations and one hundred is unclear. I will then rank the variables to account for this unknown disparity, and use Spearman's rho—a statistical test used to show the correlation among two sets of ranked variables—to assess the relationship between media visibility and congressional testimonies.

*Regressing policy authority on political partisanship ( $X_3$  as a function of  $X_1$ )*

Similar to above, when political partisanship has been determined for each think tank in my sample, I will analyze the relationship between my measure, political partisanship, and my measure of policy authority, think tank congressional testimonies.

I will likewise, assess the direction and strength of the relationship with a correlation coefficient. Then, I will determine the size and effect of the relationship with hierarchical linear model, random effects regression.

Political partisanship ( $X_2$ )

Building upon the work of scholars who have examined partisanship within political parties (Hacker & Pierson, 2005), I will create a measure of think-tank partisanship and determine its values, and their changes over time, for the think tanks in my sample. This analysis presumes all think tanks have an ideology, and will follow the spectrum used by Lewis, et al., (2019) in the creation of DW-Nominate ideology scores. (By comparison,



Rich and Weaver (2000) utilize a three-level Likert scale for ideology—namely, conservative, non-identifiable, and liberal; “non-identifiable” think tanks were defined as such because their politics were apparently balanced, indiscernible, or uneasily placed in a left-right spectrum.)

There are several variables to be considered in my sample of think tanks with regards to media visibility: partisanship, geographic location, age of institution, size (or budget), staff size (closely related to budget), and interlocks with congressional and other government service (a measure of the “revolving door” phenomenon discussed earlier).

Measuring think tank partisanship can be difficult, given that IRS tax law stipulates nonprofits remain nonpartisan or risk losing their classification. As a result, most think tanks are not forthright about their prevailing ideologies, but some are. Some self-identify in their mission statements and other published materials. Past court decisions have mandated that think tanks limit their attempts to influence legislation to less than five percent of their budgets so that their political involvement remains “insubstantial” and they can keep their tax-exempt status (Rich, 2004, p.18).

Location

Having an address within the beltway is helpful when increasing media visibility.

Washington-based think tanks receive 1.93 times the number of citations that non-

Washington-based think tanks receive for every million dollars in revenue (Rich &

Weaver, 2000). No other variable was found to be as significant in Rich and Weaver’s

analysis, which includes state-focused as well as nationally-focused media publications. Being close to policymakers facilitates such personal relationships, for example, that are important “between experts and politicians” and a “core dynamic in the politics of expertise” (Bimber, 1996, p. 5).

#### Age

The age of an institution also matters, given that relationships with journalists require time to grow. In order to provide a more proportional classification of the significance of age, the fourth root of the think tank’s age in years will be used in this analysis. For example, a sixteen-year-old think tank may be expected to have twice the visibility as a one-year-old think tank; an eighty-one-year-old think tank is expected to have three times the visibility of a one-year-old think tank.

#### Size

In addition, differences in budget should be accounted for, particularly in the present context of heightened competition for revenue. For example, the Heritage Foundation alone has a budget larger than the entire “liberal cluster” of think tanks, which includes the Economic Policy Institute (Rich and Weaver 2000). In order to account for such disparities, an organization’s number of citations will be divided by its budget in a given year and reported as citations per one million dollars (thus following Rich and Weaver’s method).

## **Conclusion**

Scholarly study of think tanks is more important than ever. Claims of non-partisanship have become more problematic for modern think tanks; even as certain elite think tanks have come to dominate the industry. The rise of new media platforms provides think tanks with new means of influencing policymakers via their messaging, even as partisan foundations and other funders have pushed their favored think tanks toward more results-oriented approaches in their research. This proposed research study will help fill in gaps in our knowledge of modern think tanks by examining the intersection of various factors relating to think tank influence, media visibility, and political partisanship.

## Ch.5 RESULTS

I first present partisanship scores for select think tanks (n = 19), along with other descriptive statistics. I then provide Pearson correlations among the variables to provide an overall portrait of the direction and strength of relationships. It is worth remembering that Human Rights Watch was omitted as an outlier – if it were included, nearly 50 percent of Twitter followers in my sample would be attributed to Human Rights Watch alone. From these data, I construct a hierarchical regression model that will be used to predict the likelihood of appearing before Congress.

### **Descriptive statistics**

*Partisanship.* Partisanship scores were derived by examining each congressional record that mentions a nonprofit think tank in my sample. I identified 825 such records, which I coded as *criticism*, *support*, or *activity*. For the most part, these designations were straightforward. When mentioning think tanks, members of Congress were usually clear whether they were using such expert authority to support their arguments. For example, the following two examples were coded as “support”: remarks that Senator Tom Carper (D) from Delaware made on July 27, 2017, regarding the Heritage Foundation and the Affordable Care Act (“It is probably heresy, as a Democrat, to say this, but it was a good idea”); and (2) remarks that Republican member of the House from Arizona, David Schweikert, made about an Urban Institute analysis of deficits from FICA taxes and Medicare costs (“This slide isn’t from some conservative group. I believe it is from the Urban Institute. This is just reality”).

I excluded mentions coded as criticism or activity from my analysis because my study sought to determine where the views of political leaders coincide with those of think tanks. Criticisms occurred when members of Congress attacked the research or statements of think tanks as inaccurate, partisan, or otherwise illegitimate. For example, I designated this April 4, 2017, statement by Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio)—which attacked a Peterson Institute projection regarding the impacts of NAFTA—as criticism: “The Peterson Institute said we would have jobs, we would have rising incomes, we would have more benefits for workers. Wrong, wrong, wrong.” Activities were events taking place with or at these think tanks unrelated to policy. I removed references to the “Daily Digest,” a daily itinerary of sorts within congressional records that indicates events that think tanks may be party to, and that excludes congressional deliberations. After removing these references, the number of records mentioning think tanks fell to 661.

There are a couple limitations to coding criticisms and activities both as zero as I have. For instance, it is worth considering a critique as anti-support, and therefore it could be coded as a negative value negating supportive comments to the same think tank or adding negative value (positive for the opposition party) to others. Moreover, some representatives simply cite think tanks more frequently than others and it would be useful to parse out total mentions, regardless of context, in order to ascertain these members.

Furthermore, the designations were not mutually exclusive; support may mix with criticism or activity, and in several cases I needed to thoroughly review the context of a

particular mention to gauge whether it was an instance of criticism and/or support. For example, the following quote on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018 by Sen. Sanders (I) from Vermont was coded as support: “In a 2017 report by the conservative Cato Institute, Saudi Arabia, our ally in this terrible war in Yemen, was ranked 149 out of 159 countries in terms of freedom and human rights. That is our ally. That is the country with which we are putting our credibility on the line.” Cato’s report is used, I think, as part of a larger critique of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, caused in part by the U.S. and its partnership with an undemocratic monarchy. But in this instance, Sanders uses Cato’s ranking to *support* his critique. It is also important to note that each record is different. Some may be single-page transcripts, while others are as long as 70 pages, with several legislators making reference to several different think tanks.

Finally, I did not code the occurrences of publicly funded think tanks, Congress’s support agencies. While it could add depth to my study, my analysis focuses on nonprofit think tanks; proper comparisons to publicly funded think tanks would be useful for future research, but my preliminary analysis found that the two groups were not comparable in a straightforward manner on the metrics I am using here (for example, the CRS Twitter account is private and used for internal communication). I did track mentions of the Congressional Research Service; with 104 records (not included in my sample of 661), it appears less often in the congressional record than the most frequently referenced private think tank, the Heritage Foundation, which had 128 mentions.

After coding references to Members of Congress (MOCs), MOC ideology scores were applied to the referenced think tank, totaled, and averaged by mention. Over 500 coded references using DW–Nominate scores for the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress were used to establish partisanship scores for think tanks.

The results of my partisanship analysis are found in Table 5.1. The scores represent the average partisanship value of the think tank based on the ideology scores from DW–Nominate data of who mentions a think tank’s research, reports, and ideas. In other words, a politician’s political predisposition is used here as a proxy for the political disposition of the think tank they reference. For example, these findings suggest a report or article by the National Bureau for Economic Research would not be unlike a speech from Senator Joe Donnelly of Indiana (D). Likewise, work by the Hoover Institute might have a similar ideological cast as a speech from Pennsylvania representatives Ryan Costello (R) or Patrick Meehan (R). Put another way, a speech from Senator Susan Collins of Maine (R) might be something one would hear at AEI or the RAND Corporation, and a speech by Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia (D) might be overheard at Brookings or the Atlantic Council.

**Table 5. 1: Think Tank Partisanship Scores**

<i>Think Tank</i>	<i>Partisanship Score</i>
<i>American Enterprise Institute</i>	0.081
<i>Atlantic Council</i>	-0.054
<i>Brookings Institution</i>	-0.054
<i>Center for American Progress</i>	-0.393
<i>CATO Institute</i>	-0.237
<i>Center on Budget and Policy Priorities</i>	-0.374
<i>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</i>	0.111

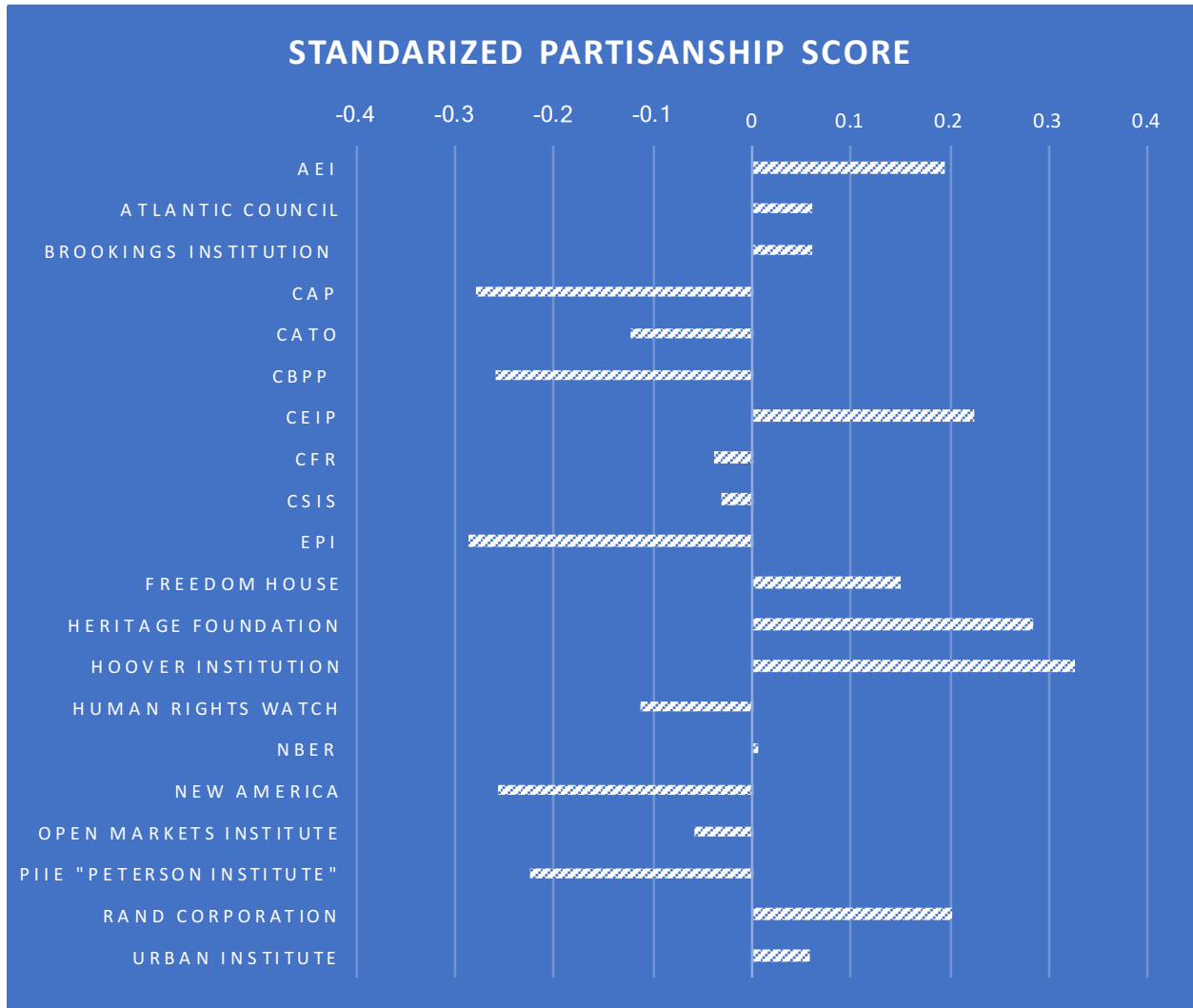
<i>Council on Foreign Relations</i>	-0.154
<i>Center for Strategic and International Studies</i>	-0.144
<i>Economic Policy Institute</i>	-0.400
<i>Freedom House</i>	0.035
<i>Heritage Foundation</i>	0.170
<i>Hoover Institution</i>	0.213
<i>Human Rights Watch</i>	-0.228
<i>National Bureau of Economic Research</i>	-0.108
<i>New America</i>	-0.372
<i>Open Markets Institute</i>	-0.172
<i>Peterson Institute</i>	-0.339
<i>RAND Corporation</i>	0.087
<i>Urban Institute</i>	-0.057

Note: As described in the main text, these data are based on DW-Nominate scores for members of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (Lewis, et al., 2019), which I applied as a proxy for the partisanship scores of the think tanks that each member of Congress references. Higher scores correspond to more references by conservative members of Congress. Human Rights Watch's partisanship score is included here even though it is omitted from my SPSS analyses; see the earlier note about its status as an outlier.

In this analysis, a higher partisanship score is associated with a more conservative think tank. Overall, the range of partisanship among think tanks is narrow (-.4004 to .2133) compared to that for policymakers (-.76 to .93). This is expected, given that as more members in both parties, or within the same party, reference a think tank, the averages will drag partisanship scores to the center. The mean ideology score is -.114, with a standard deviation of .199; in other words, NBER's partisanship score of -.108 means that it is slightly more conservative than the mean (see Figure 5.1). The standardized view places the average at the mean partisanship score for think tanks.



**Figure 5. 1 Standardized Partisanship Scores**



Some of the scores raised questions, given what is known about specific think tanks. For example, the Peterson Institute was mentioned only by Democrats, giving it the appearance in this analysis of one of the most liberal think tanks (recall unsupportive comments were not coded). The late Pete G. Peterson, who chaired the institute that carries his name, was the co-founder of the Blackstone Group, a private equity firm, and former chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations. The institute is known for its

support of a balanced budget, raising concerns in its research about the consequences of rising federal debt, such as limited growth and potential cuts to Social Security (The Nation, 2013). While the Peterson Institute tends to be seen as a vehicle for fiscally conservative, even Tea Party, proposals, more centrist Democrats like Heidi Heitkamp invoked its arguments during the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress: debt and limited growth can be used as a rationale by either party when attempting to block the policies of a Congress dominated by its opposition. Take member of the House from Alabama (D), Terri Sewell's reaction to Trump's proposal to implement a 25 percent tariff on automotive imports: "The Peterson Institute for International Economics predicts that if the new auto tariffs are implemented, the United States will lose 624,000 jobs and production would fall by 4 percent. As Members of Congress, we cannot stand by and allow this administration's destructive trade policies to hurt American workers."

*Budget, location, and age.* The expenditures by the think tanks in my sample over the two-year period of analysis total \$2.35 billion, or about \$1.27 billion a year (n = 31); the budget mean was \$78.5 million, with a standard deviation of \$123 million. The RAND Corporation had the largest two-year budget, at over \$650 million, and the Center for Economic Policy Research had the smallest, at \$4 million. However, given that there are a few think tanks with large budgets, the median (\$44 million) is a more appropriate measure of the financial resources of the typical think tank (see Table 5.2 for more information on think tank finances based on their Form 990s, an annual filing required by the IRS for nonprofit organizations).

Out of the 35 think tanks, 26 – about three-quarters – are located within city limits of Washington, D.C. The average age of a think tank in my sample (n=35) is 44 years, which would mean an organization was founded in 1975. (If all these ages were summed, nearly nineteen hundred years of experts helping government think have been accumulated by my sample.)

**Table 5. 2: IRS Form 990 Information for Select Think Tanks**

<i>Think Tanks</i>	<i>% Change in Assets</i>	<i>Net Assets in 2017 (in millions)</i>	<i>Two-Year Expenditures (in millions)</i>
<i>American Enterprise Institute</i>	5.4%	\$320.7	\$105.8
<i>Atlantic Council</i>	43.3%	\$38.4	\$51.7
<i>Brookings Institution</i>	1.8%	\$474.8	\$199.0
<i>Center for American Progress</i>	10.1%	\$54.4	\$87.2
<i>Cato Institute</i>	7.5%	\$81.4	\$60.6
<i>Carnegie Endowment for Intl. Peace</i>	8.5%	\$331.6	\$73.9
<i>Center for Economic and Policy Res.</i>	-44.4%	\$1.0	\$4.0
<i>Council on Foreign Relations</i>	8.1%	\$519.6	\$143.0
<i>Center for a New American Security*</i>	38.9%	\$10.0	\$19.0
<i>CSIS*</i>	5.4%	\$143.6	\$91.2
<i>Foreign Policy Res. Inst.</i>	14.3%	\$1.6	\$4.5
<i>Freedom House*</i>	-13.3%	\$3.9	\$62.8
<i>Heritage Foundation</i>	10.4%	\$265.8	\$167.0
<i>Hudson Institute</i>	20.9%	\$40.5	\$28.1
<i>Human Rights Watch</i>	4.1%	\$213.5	\$145.7
<i>IPS*</i>	32.6%	\$5.7	\$8.1
<i>Manhattan*</i>	1.7%	\$23.7	\$36.7
<i>Mercatus</i>	-1.1%	\$18.8	\$56.5
<i>NCPPR*</i>	9.1%	\$1.2	\$13.5
<i>New America</i>	13.6%	\$26.8	\$73.3
<i>NBER</i>	5.9%	\$123.0	\$80.1
<i>Peterson Institute*</i>	2.8%	\$70.2	\$20.9
<i>RAND*</i>	17.8%	\$280.9	\$666.1
<i>Resources for the Future*</i>	3.1%	\$60.7	\$28.3
<i>Stimson Center</i>	3.4%	\$3.0	\$11.0
<i>Urban Institute</i>	4.5%	\$158.0	\$179.9
<i>WCEG</i>	25.8%	\$3.9	\$9.6
<i>W. Wilson Center*</i>	1.1%	\$89.9	\$47.7
<i>Avg. reported asset change</i>	8.6%		

Source: IRS public filings of Form 990s

\* 2015-2016 tax forms were used when 2017 was unavailable.

*Media visibility.* Using Newspaper Source Plus, I analyzed references to the think tanks in my sample during the analysis period from January 2017 to January 2019. The total number of references to think tanks in print media were 142 in the *Washington Post*, 181 in the *New York Times*, and 107 in the *Wall Street Journal*, with a combined print total of 431 mentions in print media (this figure does not include online-only articles). During this same period, the number of appearances by think tanks to give testimony before the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress totaled 321. The mean number of congressional testimonies for a think tank was 9; however, the median was 5, indicating that a few think tanks give most of the testimonies.

The average monthly number of tweets from a think tank provides a measure of their social media activity. This number is calculated based on data from the month of a think tank's Twitter account creation to the end of the analysis period, March 2020. The measured activity ranges from 15 tweets per month (Institute for Policy Studies) to 792 tweets per month (Brookings), with an average of 270 tweets per month and a standard deviation of 191 (n=33).

To gauge more recent social media activity, I separated out a period from April 2018 to March 2020 to compare the pace of activity as measured by tweets per month (see Table 5.3). Brookings has been consistent in their output, steadily producing about 800 tweets per month. However, some think tanks have recently accelerated their activity, like the RAND Corporation and Heritage Foundation. While overall their tweets per month were 445 and 616, respectively, in recent years they have ramped up to about 800 per month.

The sharpest growth was for the Economic Policy Institute, which had overall Twitter activity of about 215 tweets per month, but which in the more recent period posted an average of about 639 tweets per month; EPI output has increased by about 300 percent in the last two years, compared to its pace of activity since account creation to 2020, over 11 years ago.

**Table 5. 3: Social Media Activity for Select Think Tanks**

<i>Think Tank*</i>	<i>Overall Tweet/Month Pace</i>	<i>2018-2020 Pace</i>
<i>AEI</i>	436.6	291.3
<i>Brookings Institution</i>	792.3	800.0
<i>CATO</i>	534.3	608.7
<i>CBPP</i>	178.5	182.6
<i>CEIP</i>	257.1	243.5
<i>CFR</i>	418.4	460.9
<i>CSIS</i>	618.5	695.7
<i>EPI</i>	215.5	639.1
<i>Heritage Foundation</i>	616.9	808.7
<i>Hoover Institution</i>	238.4	121.7
<i>Mercatus Center</i>	290.8	317.4
<i>NBER</i>	100.8	104.3
<i>New America</i>	232.7	139.1
<i>Open Markets Institute</i>	158.6	200.4
<i>Peterson Institute</i>	184.8	265.2
<i>RAND Corporation</i>	445.5	800.0
<i>Urban Inst</i>	136.3	191.3

\* based on overall measures (from account creation) and cross-sectional measures (2018-20)

Other think tanks, like the Hoover Institution and New America, have dramatically reduced their Twitter output. Whereas these two think tanks now produce 122 and 139 tweets per month, respectively, in my cross-section, their averages from the launches of their Twitter accounts were 238 and 232 per month, which corresponds to a drop in social media activity of nearly 50 percent.

The average think tank has about 117,000 Twitter followers, with a standard deviation of 148,000. The high degree of dispersion in these data is due to the heavy skew toward think tanks with many followers, such as the Heritage Foundation; most think tanks have followers in the tens of thousands. Heritage is by far the most followed think tank, with nearly 660,000 followers in March 2020 – representing nearly 17 percent of all think tank followers in my sample. The next tier of think tanks in terms of Twitter followings includes the Brookings Institution, Cato Institute, and CFR, each of which have over one-third of a million followers, followed by AEI, the Hoover Institution, and the Atlantic Council, each with just over one hundred thousand followers.

Counting “likes” on tweets by think tanks provides a measure of the effectiveness of their social media activity. As early as March of 2019, Twitter began testing the removal of “like” and “retweet” counts from public access, but I had previously gathered data for this metric in April 2018 from a subsample of think tanks ( $n = 15$ ). Notably, the range of likes in this subsample is broad. Brookings and Heritage Foundation had more than 72,000 likes, and the Urban Institute, EPI, and NBER had less than 15,000. However, a different picture of the “like” data emerges when this metric is averaged across the number of tweets made (again, up to April 2018). On the popular end, for example, the Peterson Institute and Urban Institute garnered roughly one “like” for every two tweets, whereas Heritage Foundation, AEI, EPI, Brookings, and CSIS collected less than one like for every three tweets. The CFR, “Wall Street’s think tank” (Shoup, 2015), collected less than one “like” per hundred tweets, which is surprising given that the CFR had 370,000 followers at the time. Across the subsample, the average number of tweets needed for one “like” was about eight. These data suggest that think tanks are very active

on Twitter but receive relatively little attention from their thousands of followers or the broader public.

## **Correlational analysis**

I calculated Pearson correlations (see Table 5.4) to assess the strength and direction of bivariate relationships. Although Pearson correlations are not PRE (proportional reduction of error) measures of association, they are easy to understand and paint an overall picture of potential relationships. R-square is a PRE, and can be used to approximate how completely one variable accounts for the other, adding depth to the analysis.

According to the analysis, total print media citations and social media activity (tweets per month) are significantly correlated to a very large degree ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Cohen J. , 1988). In fact, about 49 percent of the variation in total print media citations can be explained by tweets per month (r-square = 0.491). While media visibility efforts appear to be aligned, however, these different metrics may provide unique information, and therefore I have included both of them in my hierarchical regression model.

Think tanks face higher hurdles in getting published or cited in print media than they do in social media, which can explain their high Twitter activity relative to their print citations. AEI, for example, was referenced in print media 56 times during the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, while in the cross-section of recent social media activity AEI posted 6,700 tweets, or about 300 posts per month.

**Table 5. 4: Pearson Correlations**

Pearson Correlations	Washington DC	Partisanship Score	WaPo	NYT	WSJ	Print Total	Testimony	2-yr Budget	Print Total/\$M	Followers	Followers/Tweet	Followers/Account Age	TweetMonth	Tweetmonth / \$M
Age	0.001	.593**	.447**	.369*	0.295	.407*	0.239	0.284	0.305	.346*	0.342	.345*	0.292	-0.119
Washington DC	1	-0.244	0.26	0.238	0.16	0.243	0.102	-0.226	-0.211	0.256	0.335	0.237	0.017	-0.33
Partisanship Score		1	0.351	0.248	.471*	0.379	0.428	0.45	-0.309	0.391	.490*	0.381	0.264	-.517*
WaPo			1	.791**	.639**	.888**	.629**	0.323	0.125	.840**	.449**	.851**	.723**	-0.287
NYT				1	.788**	.958**	.657**	0.181	0.322	.596**	0.293	.607**	.621**	-0.218
WSJ					1	.878**	.754**	0.333	0.211	.548**	0.211	.523**	.579**	-0.253
Print Total						1	.740**	0.294	0.254	.719**	.348*	.721**	.701**	-0.274
Testimony							1	.472**	0.046	.670**	0.242	.666**	.668**	-0.304
2-yr Budget								1	-0.199	.396*	0.187	.404*	.419*	-0.346
Print Total/\$M									1	-0.027	-0.002	-0.038	0.067	0.348
Followers										1	.581**	.991**	.751**	-0.271
Followers/Tweet											1	.567**	0.099	-.472**
Followers/Account Age												1	.788**	-0.272

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

The relationship between think tank partisanship and its visibility in print media is less straightforward than might be expected. On one hand, the more conservative the think tank is, the more likely it is to be referenced in the *Wall Street Journal* (n = 19; r = 0.471; p < 0.05). No such significant relationship existed – either in a liberal or conservative direction – for the other two papers of record. On the other hand, the most active Twitter accounts tend to be liberal, once budget is accounted for (via the tweet/month/\$M variable – tweets per month per million dollars in budget); for this relationship, the Pearson’s r is -0.517 and the r-square is 0.26. (Raw Twitter activity measures have no statistically significant relationship to partisanship.) In other words, after controlling for their budgets, the Twitter activity of the think tanks in my sample explains 26.7% of the variation in their partisanship scores.

In my analysis of variables correlated with appearances before Congress, the most influential variables overall were found to be tweets per month, followers by age, and



citations in the *Wall Street Journal*. Each of these variables was highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), and based on these findings, I incorporated each of them, in this order, within my hierarchical regression (described below). The high degree of correlation between the print citations variables—the three measures for individual print outlets (the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*) and the combined total—suggest that they measure a similar phenomenon, though the *Wall Street Journal* had the strongest correlation with the congressional testimonies variable. Given its reputation as a more conservative media outlet relative to the other two newspapers, I used the *Wall Street Journal* to predict appearances before Congress during the analysis period, which featured a more conservative Congress.

The correlational analysis also found that a significant relationship between a think tank's two-year budget and its likelihood of appearing before Congress ( $n = 30$ ;  $r = 0.472$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Not surprisingly, think tanks with more financial resources were more likely to give congressional testimony; this budget metric was also significantly related, though slightly less so, to followers and tweets per month. Think-tank age was positively correlated with followership, total citations, and citations individually in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*; there appeared to be no relationship between age and citations in the *Wall Street Journal*, however. Age is also positively correlated with conservatism ( $r = 0.593$ ), which was the strongest relationship that age had to any of the variables considered here, explaining about 35 percent of the variation in partisanship scores.

## **Predicting appearances before Congress**

Based on the strength of their correlations in the earlier analysis, I predicted appearances before the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress using the following variables, in this order: tweets per month (tweet/month), followers by age of Twitter account (followers/account age), and references in the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ). I based this ordering within my hierarchical regression analysis on a theoretical consideration of the process by which media visibility might lead to congressional testimony. As I discussed earlier, the additional filter that editors apply to content may slow or even block a think tank's ability to easily reach the public and potential donors. Social media – Twitter, in this case – circumnavigates that barrier to the public. If social media activity precedes print, then followers could drive the importance of an issue on the media's agenda. It is not uncommon to find print articles reporting on issues that have already generated a flurry of social media attention. While the inverse also occurs – print articles spurring social media activity – it is clear that print media cannot compete with social media in terms of output and speed. My analysis builds upon this assumption that social media precedes print media.

Thus, I use social media activity in the first block, then followers by age of Twitter account in the second block, and finally citations in the *Wall Street Journal* in the third block. The followers by age variable was added to account for the size of a think tank's social network. While the variable “followers by age” was minutely weaker than “followers” overall in strength of relationship to appearing before Congress, the need to standardized the length of time an account accumulates followers seems to benefit from face validity. A think tank with half the Twitter account age should be reasonably

expected to have less followers, and thus standardized. As discussed earlier, I added citations in the *Wall Street Journal* given that it is the periodical preferred by conservatives (in power during the analysis period), and among the four print media variables, this measure had the strongest observed relationship with congressional testimonials.

Although there were variables to consider worth including in my hierarchical regression model, like budget or partisanship, it was the media's role as conduit to policymakers that this study means to investigate. By comparison, the other variables lacked the strength found in media variables, none more than location, to congressional appearances. Moreover, media's role as special conduit for think tank expertise has long been acknowledged by Frederick C. Mosher (1984) with regards to Congress' own support agency, the GAO. Adding further variables from print or social media would risk multicollinearity as well as fail to contribute new information to the model.

Before the analysis was conducted, I dropped one case (Human Rights Watch) because it was an outlier, as discussed earlier. This reduced the number of cases for this analysis to 34. The bivariate relationships were mostly linear, with no unexpected signs.

The results of the hierarchical regression are presented in Tables 5.5 and 5.6. Part, partial, and zero-order correlations of each predictor with congressional testimony were requested alongside tolerance scores and default statistics.

The overall regression model was statistically significant with all three predictors,  $R = 0.821$ ,  $R^2 = 0.674$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.641$ ,  $F(3, 29)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Appearing before Congress in a hearing could be reasonably predicted using these three variables, explaining about 64 percent of the variance in congressional testimonies accounted for by the regression.

Individual predictors can be assessed using  $t$  ratios from individual regression slopes each time a variable is first added. For example, in Step 1 tweets per month were statistically significant:  $t(31) = 5.002$ ,  $p < .001$ , and an  $R^2_{inc} = .447$ . The direction of the relationship between tweets per month and congressional testimony was as expected. The positive relationship indicates that more social media activity predicts an increased likelihood of appearing before Congress. Followers by account age did not significantly increase  $R^2$  when it was entered in Step 2:  $t(30) = 1.803$ ,  $p = .091$ , and an  $R^2_{inc} = .051$ . The direction was also as expected. Finally, in Step 3, *Wall Street Journal* mentions were statistically significant:  $t(29) = 3.964$ ,  $p < .001$ , and an  $R^2_{inc} = .176$ . The direction was positive and expected. Tolerance scores – the amount of change in congressional testimony *not* already included by other variables – suggest each variable contributes new information to the model. Tolerance scores are as follows: tweet per month is 0.341; followers by account age is 0.372; *Wall Street Journal* is 0.653. In sum, appearing before Congress is well explained by the set of predictors in my study. The most potent predictor is citations in *Wall Street Journal*, in spite of the fact that this variable was only included in the final step. Only followers by account age failed to significantly increase  $R^2$  in Step 2, when it was entered. Reversing the order of followers by age of account and *Wall Street Journal* yielded similar results.

**Table 5. 5: Results of Hierarchical Regression**

**Results of Hierarchical Regression to Predict Congressional Testimony**

	Congressional Testimony	Tweet/month	Followers/Acct Age	WSJ	b	B	sr <sup>2</sup> <sub>incr</sub>
TWEET/MONTH	0.668				0.008	0.151	0.447***
FOLLOWERS/ACCT AGE	0.666	0.788			0.003	0.275	0.051
WSJ	0.751	0.579	0.523		1.132	0.52	0.176***
					Intercept = 1.177		
MEAN	9.64	270.323	924.878	3.24			
SD	10.807	191.959	1101.824	4.963			
					R <sup>2</sup> =	0.674	
					R <sup>2</sup> adj =	0.641	
					R =	0.821***	

**Table 5. 6: Summary of Each Step in Hierarchical Regression**

**Summary of R<sup>2</sup> Values and R<sup>2</sup> Changes at Each Step in the Hierarchical Regression**

		R <sup>2</sup> for Model	F for Model	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F for R <sup>2</sup> Change
1	Tweet/month	0.447	F(1, 31) = 25.03***	0.447	F (1, 31) = 25.03***
2	Tweet/month, Followers/Acct Age	0.498	F(2, 30) = 14.87***	0.051	F (1, 30) = 3.05
3	Tweet/month, Followers/Acct Age, WSJ	0.674	F(3, 29) = 20.01***	0.176	F (1, 29) = 15.71***
	* p < .05				
	** p < .01				
	*** p < .001				

## **Ch. 6 Predators and Principles**

Think tanks are political actors. As I described in this dissertation, they can be seen as operating on two axes: from principled to predatory, and from rigorous to negligent. While never a unanimous view (as the conclusions of the Brownlow Committee emphasized), a once-popular view of think tanks was that they were led by a dispassionate pursuit of truth, seeking practical solutions to complex social problems. For certain think tanks, this may still be true, but there are also pressures to risk more predatory and negligent behaviors in order to attract (and keep) donors or support bias and prejudice. The think tanks in my study are spending over \$1 billion a year, engaging with members of Congress and interacting heavily with media, activities that raise questions about where they fall within the principled-predatory and rigorous-negligent continuums.

### **Think tanks acting predatorily on behalf of elites**

One common contemporary view of think tanks is that they represent the interests and preferences of elites, and my analysis supports this view. I find that budget is decisive with regards to appearing before Congress. Moreover, this budget measure does not include assets or endowments, which may understate the extent of this inequity. Similar to the financialization of the American economy, think tanks too are increasingly financialized. Think tank net assets in general are increasing; and some think tanks, like AEI, Brookings, CFR, CEIP, and the Peterson Institute, have net assets on the order of four to ten times their yearly expenditures. On one hand, these assets can enable big think tanks to weather lulls in financial donations, but on the other, it raises questions regarding their non-profit claims. By comparison, the seven smallest think tanks by

assets in my sample total \$20.3 million, or one-fifteenth that of AEI. Moreover, the big think tanks have elite connections with board members from the top echelons of business and finance. The typical think tank saw an average increase in its reported net assets of nearly nine percent from 2016 to 2017 (as seen in Table 5.2). In short, big government accepts big think tanks.

These data also fail to account for how think tanks often act—often predatorily—in concert with wealthy donors, action funds, and 501(c)4s, which may be able to turn on and off resources as desired. These collaborations are especially prevalent among larger think tanks, whose revenue and assets are increasing at a faster rate than their expenditures are. Between 2016 and 2017, for instance, the Atlantic Council’s revenue increased by 54 percent and its assets by 43 percent, while its expenditures only grew 15 percent.

Their accumulated assets have grown so substantial that the largest think tanks may have difficulty spending their funds. These dominant think tanks also have a disproportionate amount of direct communication with Members of Congress, compared to the smaller think tanks in my sample. The top ten percent of think tanks invited to give testimony to Congress, Heritage, AEI, and CSIS respectively, amount to more than a third of all testimonies given from my sample (34.9%).

Of course, think tanks, even at their origin, were political and politicized. Frederick Mosher’s (1982) milquetoast appraisal of the debate between policy-politics and administration in the Brownlow Committee belies first-hand accounts of the feud with Brookings. As conflicting reports from the groups serve to undercut one another, Louis

Brownlow was alarmed “the reputation of government research... for scientific impartiality is at stake” (Roberts, 1995). At the time, the Rockefeller Foundation attempted to mediate a political battle among these two in secret, whose conflict served to undercut a growing federal bureaucracy from a public likely unwilling to accept. Today, the belief that think tanks provide impartial expertise may serve to mask even more predatory and partisan exercise of power. Ignoring this political dimension only invites more predatory and negligent actors into the arena.

Furthermore, big think tanks tend to work closely with big business and big donors, which raises questions about whether they should still be given the de facto public subsidy of tax-exempt status. The president of New America is congenial to these close relationships with donors, stating “these are not just black boxes; they’re people. Google is a person... particularly when they give you money, which is really a nice thing” (Cohen R. M., 2018). Others, like social media giant, Facebook, partnered a relationship with the Atlantic Council, Taiwan donates consistently to AEI, and Saudi Arabia made contact with dozens of think tanks in the wake of the Jamal Khashoggi murder. This may speak to a growing tolerance in American politics for large-scale institutional power, foreign and domestic. While President Theodore Roosevelt’s new nationalism decried corporate power, by mid-century orthodox economists described monopoly positively and argued that great size did not necessarily hinder the efficient workings of markets. In a similar fashion, there appears to be little outcry regarding the dominance of the major think tanks within the ideological market. Among the nearly two thousand think tanks in the U.S., a relatively few elite think tanks receive much of the media and congressional attention.



## **Think tanks shift to the left and face pressures to adapt**

My analysis of think tank partisanship finds that older think tanks that were once seen as conservative—for instance, the Brookings Institution—have realigned as centrist or leftist relative to Members of Congress (MOC), who have overall become more conservative (Hacker & Pierson, 2016). To some extent, these political shifts within Congress have drawn establishment think tanks closer to the Democratic Party. In general, more Democrats cited think tanks than Republicans.

If Congress has moved farther to the right in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress and think tanks now find themselves ideologically more to the left, relatively speaking, then does that place pressure on them to adapt to the politics of their customers in Congress, or are they presaging a political shift of elites? And in doing so, would such posturing be symptomatic of or encourage more predatory and negligent behaviors? It is conceivable that an unprecedented shift of elites is underway.<sup>11</sup> In such cases, think tanks competing for dollars may signal shifting elite preferences as a way forward.

There are some nuances in these aggregate trends, however. Consider the Cato Institute—historically viewed as a far-right think tank—which was found in my analysis to attract more supportive references from MOCs on the left than those on the right. For example, on Nov. 6, 2017, Democratic Senator Dick Durbin cited the Cato Institute for a report on DACA that discussed the economic costs of President Trump’s September

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<sup>11</sup> According to Piketty (2020), for the first time since 1948, in the 2016 presidential election the top 10% income earners voted Democrat more than the bottom 90% income earners did. The wealthiest 10% of voters show a shrinking majority preference for Republicans, compared to the bottom 90%.

2017 decision to end DACA; Democratic Senator John Reed echoed Senator Durbin's concerns about DACA's fiscal impacts. These references and others outweighed the positive references by conservatives, but it is unclear from this cross-sectional analysis if Democrats have moved toward Cato, or if the administration that Democrats are criticizing has moved to the right of Cato.

In other words, the surprising skew of the think tank partisanship scores I calculated could be products of the aberrant nature of the current administration, and/or a political realignment of the two major parties. Another limitation of my analysis is the unique political climate and makeup of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, the basis of my empirical analysis. During this Congress, Trump benefited from a Republican-held Congress, which may have made the minority party eager to pull their political rivals back to the center by highlighting conservative policy alternatives amenable to the Democratic Party. A singular dimension would struggle to show how realigning parties actually are, however. Imagine ideologues from both poles of the spectrum forming new coalitions, they may appear as more centrists on a single dimension but do not hold the support of other traditional centrists. And Trump's presidency has the hallmarks of a party realigning (Greenberg S. , 2019). If a party realignment is occurring, we might expect to see the existing landscape of think tanks adjusting to the new political realities.

### **Social media activity and mentions in more conservative media associated with appearing before Congress**

My study has similar findings to Rich (2001) nearly two decades ago. I find that a think tank's number of mentions in the *Wall Street Journal* is positively correlated with a think tank's measured degree of conservatism, and that the *Washington Post* cites more

think tanks than the *Wall Street Journal* does. However, an interesting point to note is that while the ages of think tanks were positively correlated with their degree of conservatism, that age variable and my measure of *Wall Street Journal* citations were not significantly related. Simply put, the *Wall Street Journal* does not cite older think tanks more often than newer ones, or vice versa.

Appearing in the *Wall Street Journal*—considered to be the more conservative of the three national newspapers of record—is highly correlated with giving congressional testimony in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress. New research is beginning to test causal mechanisms of this phenomena. One recent study of British politics (Sevenans, 2017) suggests how such a relationship between media citations and political impact might operate, in that certain information in the media frames the agenda, leading to politician action. If the media influences Members of Congress in the same way that it does Members of Parliament, then think-tank appearances in the media could be decisive in determining whether their prescribed policies are adopted by policymakers.

Social media differs fundamentally from traditional print media in that it allows communication to the public largely unimpeded by traditional gatekeepers. At the same time, it imposes algorithmic incentives that favor content likely to hold the attention of audiences to a greater degree, arguably, than was the case for the news judgment of editors (Zuboff, 2019). The new media terrain offers a clear, unmistakable risk to more negligent expert behavior. Circumnavigating major editors allows think tanks to engage with the topic du jour, increasing the risk that they will disseminate negligent research—say, by tweeting (or retweeting) about unvetted studies in order to participate in quickly

changing news cycles. Though their activity in this space is far from uniform, my measures of think tank tweets per month on social media strongly correlated with their citations in traditional print media as well, suggesting that the media landscape—new and old—is winner-take-all.

A hierarchical regression reasonably predicts the likelihood of appearing before Congress based on just three publicly available variables: tweets per month, followers by age of Twitter account, and citations in the *Wall Street Journal*. It should be noted that on one hand, the tweets per month variable is related to think tank success in appearing before Congress. Generally speaking, the more active think tanks are likely to appear before Congress. On the other hand, when controlling for the size of the think tank's budget, there was no relationship to congressional testimonies. Yet, all the same, the more active the think tank is on Twitter controlling for budget, the more liberal it is.

Even the largest think tanks do not attract audiences on the scale that popular national politicians do. For instance, President Trump has over 70 million followers, but think tanks have numbers more in the range of state governors, like Virginia's Ralph Northam (with over 190,000 followers) or Texas's Greg Abbott (with over 240,000). Recall that Twitter is used by individual think tank scholars as well, some of whom can reach audiences much greater in size than my think tank sample's mean of 117,000: for example, former Brookings president and current president of CFR Richard Haass has over 170,000 followers, and Norman Ornstein of AEI has over 130,000.

The pressures that think tanks face within the media may interact with the inequalities I described earlier. For instance, I found that think tanks with large budgets are most effective at reaching Congress, but it is also true that such elite think tanks have the resources to put on large social media campaigns and engage with media outlets. Likewise, if the rise of social media and a quickening news cycle incentivizes swift but negligent behavior on the part of think tanks, more partisan and predatory think tanks funded by ideological or corporate donors—such as International Life Sciences Institute—may be best equipped to thrive in such a space.

### **Limitations and implications for future research and policies**

Beyond the limitations discussed above, it is important to note that my measure of political influence is based on appearances before Congress. Furthermore, my use of this measure assumes that appearing before Congress is a valuable objective for many think tanks. Frankly, it may not be for the more predatory and more negligent think tanks in the community, which may seek to dissemble confidence and promote doubt among the public.

Further research could account for popular think tanks in Congress that are not in my study, nor heavily referenced in the media or in McGann's index of top think tanks. Moreover, ordinal variables for support, criticism, and activity may alleviate some of the perplexity where distinctions are not overt and clear. Also, there is a gap in the research as to how and how much these groups assist departments and agencies across all levels of government. Lastly, what and how think tanks (publicly funded and non-profit) are most utilized by state legislatures? With hundreds of think tanks, and some networks

like the State Policy Network or international Atlas Network, much of the thinking about what government should do is by unofficial, publicly subsidized policy actors.

This research also speaks to the need for new policies to rein in predatory and negligent behaviors by think tanks. The race for cash led to a neglect of their primary purpose, which is to supply unbiased, rigorous information. Instead, there is an elite among the elite, that monopolize and narrow the marketplace of ideas, increasing the risk of capture and influence from fewer owners. One ambitious solution proposed by Julia Cagé (2020) would reshape the larger partisan organizational ecosystem that includes think tanks but also political parties and special-interest groups. Building from her suggestion and others like Lawrence Lessig, representatives could create a new financial instrument—I'll suggest “political power points” or “democracy dollars”—which could be given to every adult (equivalent to three or four hours pay at minimum wage, perhaps, and could be distributed via decentralized cryptocurrency). Citizens could then allocate these points to political parties or ideological movements (which think tanks could become members of). This could be funded, in part, by taxes on donations to political groups and charities, and more importantly, hasten the formation of new political movements. This view suggests that these groups are little more than publicly-subsidized vehicles – tanks – for the cultural preferences of the donor-class, void of incentives attendant to the broader public.

More modest approaches include changes to tax policies relevant to nonprofits, which currently enable partisan think tanks to operate with public subsidy, or transparency

laws. Tax law should find ways to distinguish between think tanks focused on objective research and those with more partisan or ideological aims; it should give tax-exempt, tax-deductible status only to the former group. It is plausible to imagine staggered levels of tax-status eligibility, based on the proximity of major donors to the decision-making, the degree of transparency to the public regarding the organization's activities and funding provided, profitability and perpetuity of charters, and the degree of involvement that ordinary citizens can exert over the governance of nonprofit entities, including public citizen representation on the boards of these organizations. Transparency could be required in order to receive tax-exempt status, for example. These classifications could be another useful measure for public citizens and policymakers to consider when they donate to such organizations or consume their reports.

Indeed, if think tanks adopt a more transparent approach to their funding model and address democratic deficits through shared governance, they can be a force for revitalizing American democracy. If Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have lost faith in congressional compromise, think tanks—given their relatively more moderate ideological positions—can play a constructive role in overcoming partisan gridlock. Bonica (2015) argues that if provided easily digestible informational cues, voters could more closely approximate the representative that aligns with their political disposition; laboratory studies suggest this would work (Sniderman & Stiglitz, 2012). In this area in particular, think tanks have the capability to enhance the informational context in which the public and policymakers make decisions.

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