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Have Think Tanks in Washington D.C. Become Politicized?

By Patrick Gilroy, MPP 2011

With a foreword by Helmut K. Anheier.

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Hertie School of Governance
Helmut K. Anheier

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Foreword

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The first Paper to be published in this Series is authored by MPP graduate Patrick Gilroy. It focuses on the politicization of think tanks in the United States and exemplifies the Hertie School's aim to look beyond the narrow confines of governments and public institutions in order to shed light on the various actors involved in shaping the public policy agenda, their roles and impact. Patrick Gilroy offers a theoretically grounded and empirically rigorous study. He tracks the evolution of this evermore influential group of actors in the 20th century and explores the subsequent politicization of think tanks.

I hope you find this Paper – and futures ones in the Series – stimulating and informative.

Best wishes,
Helmut K. Anheier
Dean and Professor

Have Think Tanks in Washington D.C. Become Politicized?

By Patrick Gilroy

Abstract: The paper addresses the following research question: Have think tanks in Washington D.C. become politicized from 1910 to 2010, and if so why? "Politicization" is made empirically tangible with a new primary database of all D.C. think tanks existent over the last century. Public policy-oriented research and advocacy organizations are studied from an explicitly evolutionary approach for the first time. It is found that while think tanks steadily accumulated until the early 1970s, their numbers increased fivefold from the late 1970s onwards. D.C. think tanks have, in fact, become significantly politicized over time: ideological advocacy think tanks (embracing broadly "conservative" or "liberal" worldviews) came to outnumber organizationally objective ("centrist or not identifiably ideological") academic or contract research think tanks. Most of today's advocacy think tanks embrace identifiably conservative ideologies. Based on chronological process tracing, it is shown that changes in the non-profit resource and tax environment, a relatively weak party system and frequent partisan polarization are important explanatory factors behind the politicization phenomenon. Far from living up to their constructive potential, it is argued, the capital city's think tanks now frequently hysterize rather than scrutinize policymaking, applying politico-ideological principles of economic interventionism and social justice or, far more often, free markets, limited government and individual liberties to all things public policy. Main scholarly and practical implications of think tanks' politicization are sounded out.

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1. Introduction

Think tanks make up a fascinating subset of organized actors in American civil society. What distinct organizational forms have they assumed in the United States (U.S.) from their inception up to the present day? Today, their presence is first and foremost felt in the U.S. capital. The city of Washington D.C. (D.C.) is one of the - if not the - most crowded think tank hubs worldwide. Think tanks have become taken-for-granted social and organizational phenomena of the Washington establishment. They are commonly thought to provide valuable expert services to policymakers, businessmen, journalists or the American public by engaging in public policy-oriented research, analysis, advice or advocacy. Each and every day, some D.C. think tank publishes an article, book or policy brief; hosts a podium discussion, seminar or policy lunch; testifies before Congress; meets with public officials or their aides; and is cited or interviewed in the media. Think tanks' views are frequently accepted as objective or imaginative expert opinions.

Problem Statement

Think tanks clearly have the potential to contribute to the societal flow of ideas and information, which is constitutive for a pluralistic and representative U.S. democracy. They can try to liaise between the worlds of scientific knowledge and policy. Their popular organizational form comes with the promise of consolidating a public-spirited civil society and the state's adherence to norms of good governance. At their best, think tanks can plug into the political system for "speaking truth to power" (Wildavsky 1979).

Both academic research and public policy problems are often characterized by vexing complexity. On one side, think tanks can shed light on decision-makers' policy choices, simplifying overcomplicated policy debates. On the other side, they might fruitfully complicate oversimplified discourses - by applying cutting-edge research to practical challenges, "translating" relevant findings into layman's terms. Lastly, by engaging in open-minded scholarly inquiry themselves, think tanks may enrich the often parochial rough-and-tumble of the capital's policymaking process.

But: the realization of this potential is contingent upon think tanks' production or processing of objective - as opposed to politicized - research and policy prescriptions. Perfectly detached neutrality of think tanks' each and every staffer is probably elusive or not necessarily desirable. Yet when think tanks display a single-minded organizational zeal for

politico-ideological goals or agendas, their outlined potential for policy-making could be severely compromised - if not entirely forfeited. Highly politicized think tanks could instrumentally and opportunistically use research as ammunition in divisive “wars of ideas”, spinning all facts to fit premeditated conclusions (Smith 1989). Should this be pervasive, the added value and credibility of the craft is open to question.

Over the years, several books have been written about American think tanks (see for example Abelson 1996, 2006, Ricci 1993, Rich 2004, Stone 1996, Weaver/McGann 2000). A scholarly literature has mushroomed beyond that. Organizations are mostly classified as contract research-, scholarly- or advocacy-oriented think tanks. But all too often, they are lumped together without much differentiation or taxonomical precision. There is no scarcity of almost euphoric descriptions of them, for instance as “idea factories charged with brainstorming solutions to everything from global warming to Wall Street’s implosion to the war on terror” (McGann 2009: 82). Scholars often assume think tanks’ clear-cut delimitation from political partisanship or -ideologies, eagerly adding that their activities are “hopefully empirically sourced and constructive in intent” (Hamre 2008: 2). A vague belief reverberates throughout the literature that think tanks in the U.S., at least for the most part, have a “more positive than negative influence on the policy process” (McGann 2002: 16). The straightforward challenge, then, is to harness their reputedly “vast reservoir of knowledge, information, and associational energy (…) for public good” (McGann 2011: 4). Still, inadequate attention is paid to the real possibility let alone the precise empirical extent of think tanks’ politicization over time.

Research Question

Andrew Rich’s “*Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*” is an exceptional, somewhat dated monograph assessing U.S. think tanks’ politicization until 1996 (2004). By and large following up on his lead, this paper explores the following guiding research question, cross-examining quantitative and qualitative developments:

Have think tanks in D.C. become politicized from 1910 to 2010 and if so, why?

To make politicization empirically tangible, a comprehensive primary database of D.C. think tanks over time was compiled and is analyzed in a conceptually grounded manner. Evolutionary processes in D.C.’s changing think tank world are retraced and chronicled.

This paper neither measures actual policymaking influence of think tanks, nor does it consider all U.S. organizations. It scrutinizes whether in the American capital, the ideologues have replaced the academics among the think tanks, to put it bluntly. It is hypothesized that since their inception as objective analysts at the turn of the twentieth century, most D.C. think tanks have in fact evolved into politicized advocates. The falsifiable null hypothesis is: no such trend of shifting organizational forms is discernible. While the "black box" of each D.C. think tank is methodologically opened, the focus is on the macro-level extent of politicization in the city's overall think tank landscape.

Think tanks defy easy definition or categorization. Having introduced their underexplored politics dimension, a working definition is therefore developed next and fruitful concepts from an explicitly evolutionary approach to studying organizations are presented (section 2). The method used is made fully transparent (section 3) before the main analysis shows that D.C. think tanks have, indeed, by no means evolved as a monolithic bloc of uniform actors, which is elucidated in evolutionary terms (section 4). Lastly, scholarly and practical implications of the findings are sounded out (section 5).

2. Conceptual Framework

Where does the term "think tank" come from? How is it best defined? And how can one fruitfully conceptualize D.C. think tanks' possible politicization? This section marks out these interrelated questions, selectively borrowing useful concepts from the relevant literature on think tanks and on the evolutionary approach to organizational studies.

Studying "Think Tanks"

The term "think tank" is much en vogue. A Google search in 2008 found nearly six million uses over the years (cf. Safire 2008: 733). As of today, this number has skyrocketed to nearly twenty-five million hits, testimony to the collocation's popularity. Its origins are ambiguous, but clearly predate the internet age. The notion meant different things at different times. In his comedy "*The Clouds*" (423 B.C.), Aristophanes portrays Socrates as directing a *phrontisterion* - a "thinkery" or "think shop" - made up of promising young men (cf. 2008: 733, Whitaker 2006). Some believe Englishman Thomas Clarkson coined the phrase, who established the Society for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade in 1782, combining "factual enquiry with moral argument" (Goodman 2010: 3). But originally, the English term

"think tank" probably simply meant "brain". For example, when former U.S. president Harry Truman turned eighty in 1964, he expressed the hope to live another decade, but only "if the old think tank is working" (cf. Safire 2008: 733). Most often, however, it is assumed that the label emerged during World War II to describe military- and defense-related research institutes such as the think tank *RAND Corporation* (cf. Ahmad 2008: 531, Rich 2004: 13, Stone 2005: 2). By the 1960s, it had entered popular usage in the U.S., where the *New York Times* devoted a one-week series of articles to the topic in 1967, one of which titled "*U.S. Think Tanks: $2-Billion Industry Established to Study Other People's Problems*" (see Reeves 1967, cf. Safire 2008: 733). Today, the concept enjoys widespread use and has traveled around the world, often in its English wording and with Anglo-American cultural connotations (cf. Gyngell 2008: 2, Stone 2007: 265).

So what exactly is the definition of a "think tank"? While scholars agree that think tanks are a distinctive organizational form, no consensual definition has emerged and the term's meaning is often underspecified or contested (cf. McGann/Johnson 2005: 11, Rich 2004: 11, Stone 2007: 259). Yet how a "think tank" is defined matters greatly for what samples and results researchers obtain, since scholars "'construct' the world they study and (…) conceptual models that they bring to their work influence the things they 'find'" (Weiss 1992: 37). As illustrated in Table 1, there is a relatively vast array of diverse authors' more - or less - convincing specifications of the "murky object" (Medvetz 2008: 1). One dictionary merely speaks of a mysterious-sounding "group of people with specialized knowledge and great intellectual ability" (Comfort 1995: 610). Rich provides a more nuanced definition of think tanks as "independent, non-interest-based, nonprofit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policy-making process" (2004: 11, see Table 1).

Five commonly used definitional criteria emanate from Rich's view (cf. Table 1):

- the organization's independence,
- its non-profit status,
- the production or processing of research and analysis as well as
- advice or advocacy, all of which typically are
- visibly public policy-oriented.

Table 1. Selected Think Tank Definitions and Prevalent Definitional Criteria

Author	What is a "think tank"?	Definitional Criteria				
		Independence	*Nonprofit*	*Research*	*Advocacy*	*Policy*
Ahmad	"institute, organization, corporation or group that conducts research and engages in policy, political strategy, science or technology issues, industrial or business policies, or military advice" (2008: 534)	-	-	X	-	X
Anheier	"one of several systems of knowledge creation in modern societies. (…) Whether autonomous, political or demand-driven, think tanks are the institutions in modern societies where wars of ideas are fought out." (2010: 338)	X	-	X	X	X
Bertelli/ Wenger	"independent policy research organizations that often combine research and advocacy" (2008: 225)	X	-	X	X	X
Comfort	"a group of people with specialized knowledge and great intellectual ability" (1995: 610)	-	-	-	-	-
Haas	"independent institutions organized to conduct research and produce independent, policy-relevant knowledge" (2002: 5)	X	-	X	-	X
Hellebust	"independent nonprofit public policy research organizations" (2007: 1)	X	X	X	-	X
McGann	"policy research, analysis and engagement institutions that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice" (2011:14)	-	-	X	X	X
Rich	"independent, non-interest-based, nonprofit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policy-making process" (2004: 11)	X	X	X	X	X
Rocco	"organizations engaged in the production of policy-relevant knowledge" (2009: 2)	-	-	X	-	X
Safire	"The human brain; or a group of advisers; or, specifically, a research organization or policy institute" (2008: 733)	-	-	X	-	X
Sherrington	"relatively independent organizations, engaged in research on a broad scope of interests" (2000: 174)	X	-	X	-	-
Stone	"relatively autonomous organizations with separate legal identity that engage in the analysis of policy issues" (2005: 3)	X	X	X	-	X
UNDP	"organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy" (2003: 6)	-	-	X	X	X
Waters	"nonprofit public policy research institutes that are either independent or affiliated with universities" (2006a: 851)	X	X	X	-	X

These criteria capture fairly well what think tanks are and do. Yet the unqualified notion of "independence" is problematic. First of all, one can distinguish different dimensions: legal, financial, politico-ideological or research agenda independence (cf. Ahmad 2008: 546, Stone 2005: 18). More importantly, the notion implies a clear-cut demarcation from other organizational fields whereas in practice think tanks are "constitutively hybrid organizations situated in an intermediate structural position", as Thomas Medvetz argues (2008: 5). Using the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual language, think tanks can be thought of as occupying an intermediate "social space" between four "fields of power" (the political, economic, media and knowledge-production fields), in which money ("economic capital") and reputation ("cultural capital") are the main sources of societal authority (cf. Bourdieu 1989, Medvetz 2008: 4). As illustrated in Figure 1, think tanks do manage to differentiate themselves to a degree from other types of organizations, say government agencies, grant-making foundations or lobbying firms, publishing houses or public relation firms as well as universities or public policy schools. Nevertheless, their financial basis and reputation results from association or symbolic similarities with the very forms of authority such institutions enjoy in their respective fields of power. For example, think tanks often advise government; create staff positions resembling university professorships; publish semi-scholarly monographs or research reports; write in a journalistic manner; and, conscious of their public relations, actively market products in the media or politics (cf. Medvetz 2008: 5). This way, their boundaries are neither carved in stone nor fully fluid. Think tanks are relatively autonomous (cf. Sherrington 2000: 174, Stone 2005: 3). Entangled in an open-ended - at times - conflicting "cycle of detachment and association", their precise degree of autonomy is an empirical question (Medvetz 2008: 6)[1].

The "dilemma of definition" is not solved here (cf. Medvetz 2008: 1, Stone/Denham 2004: 2). All the same, a theoretically grounded working definition can now be derived:

- *A think tank is a relatively autonomous, non-affiliated nonprofit organization producing, processing or engaging in public policy-oriented research, analysis, advice or advocacy on a regular basis.*

[1] As Figure 1 shows, intermediate structural positions of organizations between fields of power are not all that uncommon (e.g. foundations can be political as well as economic in nature, see Anheier/Daly 2007).

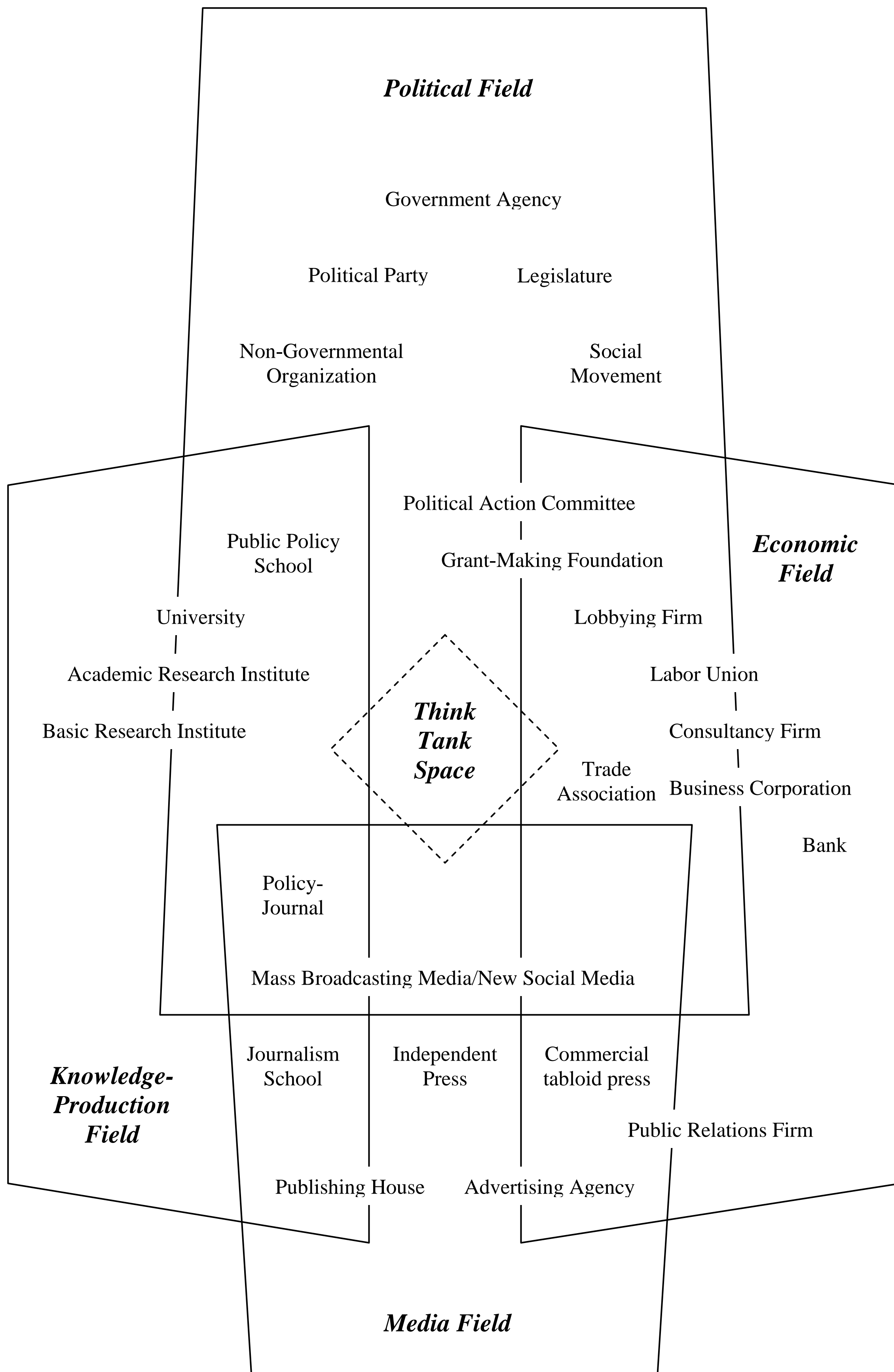

Figure 1. Think Tanks' Intermediate Social Space Within the Fields of Power (modified from Medvetz 2008: 6, cf. Bourdieu 1989)

Note that this definition, which admittedly best fits an Anglo-American context, does not include many similar organizational forms such as university-affiliated academic research institutes, which often merely focus on providing graduate or executive degree programs (cf. Rich 2004, Stone 2005: 9). It is sufficiently specified to avoid the universalistic pitfall of catch-all concepts and the particularistic pitfall of overly narrow ones.

Scholars try to sort empirical organizations into neat typologies of distinct organizational "breeds" populating the think tank world (McGann 2009: 82, see Abelson 2002, Braml 2006, Gehlen 2005, Stone 1996, Weaver/McGann 2000). Three types are salient throughout the literature (cf. Ahmad 2008: 534-535, Anheier 2010: 338):

- so-called "universities without students",
- "knowledge on demand" think tanks, and
- advocacy think tanks.

Before describing what characterizes these types, it is important to note at this point that empirical think tanks can be assumed to differ in terms of organizational objectivity, which is the single most important criterion for assessing think tanks' politicization. Pure disinterestedness is probably elusive in most if not all fields of human activity. Besides, objectivity is not the same thing as perfect neutrality. Hence, an alleviated notion of think tank "objectivity" is used here: no organizational stance that is identifiably ideological (e.g. conservative or liberal) is taken on certain policy issues as a matter of principle (cf. Rich 2001a, 2004, 2006, see section 3 for the concrete operationalization).

Academic "universities without students", once labeled "ink tanks", primarily engage in a clearly research-orientated scholastic pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself (Stone 2007: 262). They make up the least politicized category with a high degree of organizational objectivity. Most often, they have diversified funding portfolios and are, politically speaking, non-partisan or centrist middle-of-the-road institutions with clear autonomy over their research agenda, which is characterized by open-minded inquiry. Claims not grounded in transparent factual evidence but personal judgments are made explicit. Ideas result from research, not vice versa. The *Brookings Institution*, which traces back its origins to 1916, can be seen as a prototype of this category.

"Knowledge on demand" think tanks, on the other hand, pursue contract research for third parties and most often cater to government contractors' future-oriented research needs. While not fully setting their own research agenda, they tend to have no identifiable ideology

and at least attempt to adhere to organizational objectivity and professional norms of rigorous research. *RAND* is a typical example of this type.

Advocacy think tanks, finally, sharply deviate from the organizational objectivity criterion, often avowedly engaging in the partisan pursuit of politico-ideological goals. Research is but a means to an end, namely the justification of ready-made opinions and single-minded promotion of ideological goals. Dominant sponsors may have considerable influence. Ideas do not result from but motivate research (cf. Rich 2006: 13, Smith 1989: 192). In D.C., the *Heritage Foundation* exemplifies this type.

Organizational objectivity and the three basic think tank types are first practicable tools for assessing whether D.C.'s think tank landscape has become politicized. The empirical question that needs to be answered is: Of all D.C. think tanks, what were the relative proportions of ideology-driven advocacy think tanks vis-à-vis non-ideological academic or contract research think tanks over time? The evolutionary approach to organizational studies can help shed light on questions of why organizations like think tanks or entire organizational populations change over time. It is explicitly applied specifically to the study of think tanks here for the first time, and is briefly outlined next.

The Evolutionary Approach

In "*Organizations Evolving*", Howard Aldrich and Martin Ruef cut across disciplines in an attempt to sharpen common concepts and methodologies of evolutionary approaches to organizational studies (2006)[2]. Organizations in general are usefully defined as "goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, and socially constructed systems of human activity" (Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 64, cf. 267). Applied to think tanks, they are purposive organizations, which often explicitly codify organizational goals (e.g. in mission statements or other elements of their strategic communications, cf. 2006: 4-5, Saloner et al. 2001). They portray themselves as distinct entities in social space, engaging in an "elaborate game of self-assertion" (Medvetz 2008: 7, see above). In doing so, they become "real, taken-for-granted reference points" between various fields of power (Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 12, cf. Medvetz 2008: 5). Lastly, think tanks are collective action centers and carriers of routines, the "forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies and technologies around which organizations are

[2] While the authors claim to present a full theoretical "framework" or even "metatheory", their evolutionary treatment of evolving - predominantly business - organizations is better understood as a systematized conceptual synthesis of literature in political science and organizational sociology, psychology, business management, industrial economics and economic history (cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 4, 11-12, Ritzer).

constructed and through which they operate" (Lewitt/March 1988: 329, cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 5-6, 29).

Four evolutionary levels of analysis can be distinguished (cf. 2006: 28 f., Carroll 1984):

- the individual (e.g. think tank staff or a manager),
- the organization (i.e. one specific think tank),
- the population (e.g. all think tanks located in D.C.), and
- the community (e.g. entire populations of knowledge-producing organizations).

Think tank scholars - or organizational theorists generally for that matter - have often studied single or only a handful of organizations. Here, the population level of analysis is prioritized for exploring whether D.C.'s think tank landscape as a whole has become more politicized. The focus is on the interplay of think tanks as purposive actors and the opportunities or constraints of their environment - something captured by the term "embedded agency" (Zietsma/Lawrence 2010: 196). Think tanks are no isolated, self-referential systems. They actively try to shape their environment, but are also subject to the changing tides of economic, societal or cultural trends surrounding them (cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 6, 127)[3]. It is tempting to view organizations as living organisms adapting to dynamic environments, just like chameleons do (cf. Cameron/Green 2004: 90-91). Yet this metaphor clearly has its limits. Think tanks are no biological species with behavior-guiding or -determining genetic DNA structures (cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 33). Thus, speaking of a think tank's life course (rather than developmental "life cycle") avoids false analogies or undertones of a pre-programmed finality (cf. 2006: 159-160). Similarly, the notion of a think tank's founding (not "birth") or disbanding through mergers or cessation as an operating entity (not "death") is more adequate in evolutionary terms (cf. 2006: 2, 209). The growth of D.C.'s think tank population cannot be expected as a natural outcome and dominant think tank types at a given point in time are not the "'most fit' in any absolute sense" (2006: 26, cf. 136, 207). Hence, just like it would be false to read teleological "progress" into Darwin's theory of biological evolution, "narrative positivism" is best avoided in explorations of changing think tank populations (2006: 163, cf. 17). Direction and pace of evolutionary change are not fixed, but historically contingent and

[3] This picture clearly emerges from the ecological, institutional or resource dependence schools of organizational theory. Like other perspectives, they seek to contextualize organizational forms or populations and can arguably be subsumed under an evolutionary approach as presented by Aldrich and Ruef (cf. 2006: 34-60, also see Audia et al. 2006 for a concise overview of ecological and institutional literature).

possibly path-dependent (cf. 2006: 190, Pierson 2000, 2004). At the heart of an evolutionary analysis is the idea that several Darwinian processes are fruitful for elucidating social phenomena (see 2006: 16-26, Campbell 1969):

- variation (intentional or blind departure from routines or organizational forms)
- selection (the differential selection or elimination of certain types of variations)
- retention (the preservation or emulation of positively selected variations), and
- struggle (competition for scarce resources such as capital or social legitimacy).

All processes are generic in that they can be applied to biological or social systems alike (cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 16). It is expected here that they are at work within and between D.C. think tanks. An example of intra-organizational change could be that a given think tank's employee comes up with a possibly unintended innovation of how to make its financial footing less shaky. At the population level, nascent entrepreneurs - "people who initiate activities that might culminate in a viable organization" - could succeed in realizing strategic ambitions for slightly different or entirely new think tank forms (2006: 12, cf. Porter 1996: 65, Schumpeter 1934). Inter-organizational change, then, means blind diffusion or conscious emulation of novelties by other existent or emerging think tanks (cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 24, 65). Changes in environmental selection criteria can allow the carving out of new resource niches, marked by "social, economic and political conditions that can sustain the functioning of organizations that embody a particular form" (Carroll/Hannan 1995: 34, cf. 1989, Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 182-183, Porter 1996: 67). The notion of a population's "branching" processes describes the appearance and successive crowding of organizational niches (Romanelli 1991: 95, cf. Baum/Oliver 1996: 1378-1379, Dobrev et al. 2002).

A last clarifying note on metrics of population dynamics (see Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 212):

- Population density is the aggregate number of think tanks in a population.
- Carrying capacity is the maximum density the environment (e.g. D.C.) absorbs.
- The yearly founding rate is the number of think tanks added to the population in a given year, relative to the population density of the previous year.
- The yearly disbanding rate is the number of think tanks disbanded in the population in a given year, relative to the population density of the previous year.

D.C.'s think tank population density is expected to grow if founding rates are consistently higher than disbanding rates, as long as there is carrying capacity, which cannot be known in advance (cf. 2006: 213, Carroll/Hannan 1992, 2000). The evolutionary approach as presented by Aldrich, Ruef and others offers a valuable theoretical toolbox for systematically analyzing the precise dynamics of organizational change. The methodological approach used to empirically *measure* politicization is explained next.

3. Methodological Approach

Two methodological points are readily apparent for the attempt to accurately assess politicization of D.C.'s think tank landscape within an evolutionary research design:

- the aim is to capture the full organizational population over time, as well as
- to identify each recorded think tank's type (i.e. organizational objectivity).

For this purpose, a database of all relatively autonomous, non-affiliated nonprofit organizations in the city of D.C., producing, processing or engaging in public policy-oriented research, analysis, advice or advocacy on a regular basis was created in three steps, covering the time span of a full century, namely from 1910 (founding of D.C.'s first think tank) to 2010.

In a first step, think tank names were identified based not on one but several lists and directories of U.S. think tanks as well as the literature on the topic[4]. This means an archival

Table 2. Think Tank Variables (N=276)

Variable group	Indicators	*Coverage*
General	Name	99-100%
	Abbreviation	
	Website	
Status	Nonprofit status	100%
	Tax code registration	72%
Location	D.C. address	99-100%
	Distance to Congress	
	Other locations	
Life course	Founding year	100%
	Disbanding year	
	Vital events	
	Age	
Activities	Scope	100%
	Specialist/generalist	
	Main issues	
	Focus	
Strategic communications	Mission statement	100%
	Historical narrative	69%
	Slogan	61%
Politicization	Think tank type	100%
	Type Rich 2004	23%

[4] The following think tank directories were consulted: AERF 2011, FPRI 2009, Harvard Kennedy School 2010, Heritage Foundation 2010, LTIC 2010, Media Matters 2011, NIRA 2005, University of Michigan Library 2010, USIP 2009, Yahoo! Inc. 2011; scholarly books and articles by Rich 2004 (relying on a dated directory of Hellebust 1996), McGann 1995, 2009, 2011, and McGann/Johnson 2005 were useful. These authors' think tank data is made public only partially within their publications. Attempts to inquire about full database access were not successful. Thus, primary data had to be collected.

mode of the single population census was used, retrospectively detecting think tanks (cf. Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 270).

In a second step, detected D.C. entities' existence and fit with the working definition was checked. A total of 276 think tanks resulted. As specified in Table 2 above, information on 22 variables was collected and systematized, relying mainly on the think tanks' websites (accessed January to February 2011) or occasionally annual reports and relevant literature. Usually coverage rates of 99 to 100 per cent were achieved. The tax code status, a slogan and historical narrative could be identified for roughly two thirds of the think tanks. Importantly, a founding year, possible vital events like mergers, name changes or organizational spin-offs as well as mission statements could be recorded for all think tanks.

In a third step, Rich's method of scanning mission statements (and occasionally other strategic communications elements) for existing or absent identifiably ideological references, key words or phrases (i.e. organizational stances) on the indicators named in Table 3 was used to attribute think tanks to three categories (cf. 2001a: 55, 2004: 19):

- conservative (ideological),
- liberal (ideological), as well as
- centrist or no identifiable ideology.

The latter category represents the type of academic or contract research think tank with a high degree of organizational objectivity as discussed above, while think tanks avowedly driven by broadly conservative or liberal ideologies correspond to the politicized advocacy think tank type. The terms "conservative" and "liberal" refer to the two historically salient, if not perfectly coherent, forms of ideological *Weltanschauung* within the U.S.-American political context (cf. Rich 2004: 4, 19). One could further distinguish variations within those forms (e.g. libertarianism, social conservatism or progressivism), and naturally alternative worldviews do exist. However, distinguishing broadly conservative and liberal ideological proclivities, which are most frequent and relevant in U.S. policy debates, suffices for analyzing think tank politicization (cf. 2004: 4). For 64 of all 276 identified think tanks (23%, see Table 2), it was possible to reconstruct Rich's categorizations appearing only in fragments throughout his book (cf. 2004). Apart from five cases, the coding was identical, indicating (at least partial) inter-coder reliability.

Table 3. Think Tank Type Operationalization

Conservative (Ideological)	Liberal (Ideological)	Centrist or No Identifiable Ideology
Typical Main Indicators		
Free markets, deregulation	Government regulation	No identifiably ideological references No counter-ideological references Clear middle-of-the-road orientation Does not fit readily into either category
Limited government, eliminating racial and ethnic preferences in government policies	Government intervention and programs to tackle economic, social, gender or wage inequalities and poverty	
Individual liberties	Social justice	
Religious expression	"Progressive" policies	
"Traditional family values"	Environmental sustainability	
Maintaining military strength	Lowering defense spending	
Lowering immigration levels, ending illegal immigration	Supporting legal immigration, amnesty for illegal immigrants	
Counter-ideological reference (e.g. "dispelling radical socialist efforts")	Counter-ideological reference (e.g. "overcoming right-wing hate mongering")	
Possible Contributing Indicators		
Gun rights and "pro-life" opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage	Women's "reproductive rights" and support for same-sex marriage	
Consumer choice	Consumer rights	
Advancing narrowly defined U.S. national (security) interests abroad	Commitment to U.N. system, multilateralism, common interests, "global challenges"	

The two methodological issues mentioned at the outset of this section necessitate a brief elaboration. First, complete historical population coverage cannot be guaranteed with absolute certainty, for the measure is limited by existing directories and research. An effort has been made to capture all think tanks in D.C.'s organizational zoo, including "biggies" like *Brookings* as well as the wider organizational "minor league" (Wiarda 2008: 103). But a success bias is possible since scholars or directories probably better pick up well-established think tanks than disbanded ones, particularly cases of organizational "child birth deaths" (Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 268, cf. 32, Bertelli/Wenger 2008: 234). However, the think tank definition employed here explicitly contains a certain degree of organizational permanence (i.e. activities performed "on a regular basis") and the politicization question aims more at bounded entities rather than failed start-ups.

Second, for the issue of classification, it should be noted that all labeling judgments were made by relying exclusively on information supplied by the think tanks themselves in their strategic communications. Verbal self-portrayals might not correspond to or fully translate into actual behavior. Think tanks could perceive an ideological appearance as risky and politicization could be underestimated with the method used (cf. Rich 2004: 19). Yet there is good reason to assume that official mission statements or slogans represent ritualized expressions capturing think tanks' "brand" identity, goals and objectives, just like self-spun

historical narratives or "sagas" are a form of thoroughly framed "organizational autobiography", often praising a founder's vision (Aldrich/Ruef 2006: 15, cf. Braml 2006: 5).

The next section analyzes the empirical findings resulting from the explained method, and attempts to elucidate them by chronicling evolutionary developments.

4. Analysis

To answer the research question, the following analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the quantitative proliferation of D.C. think tanks from 1910 to 2010 is retraced. Second, the extent of their empirical politicization over time is analyzed. Third, specific evolutionary developments are chronologically traced to illustrate and cross-validate findings.

The Proliferation of D.C. Think Tanks

A first conspicuous empirical result of the analysis is the proliferation of D.C. think tanks in terms of sheer numbers over the course of the last century, as Figure 2 shows.

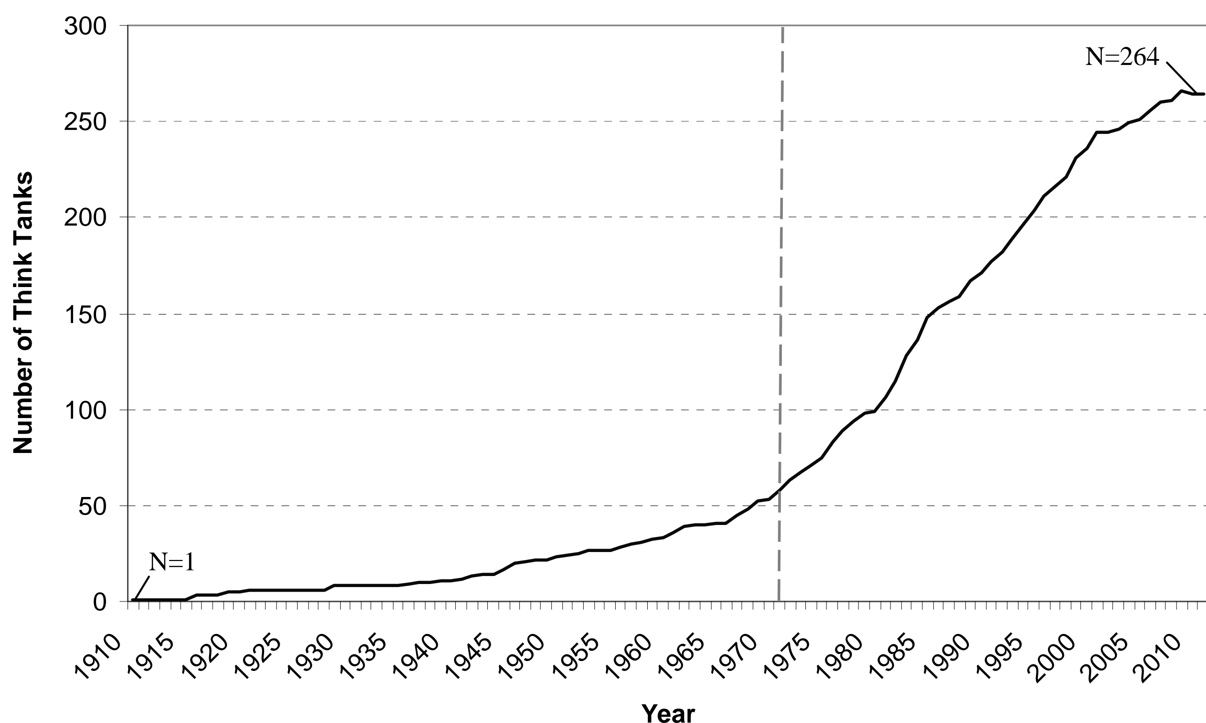

Figure 2. D.C. Think Tank Proliferation, 1910-2010

The dashed line indicates two broadly distinguishable periods of population growth:

- the accumulation of over 50 D.C. think tanks from 1910 to the early 1970s, and
- the roughly fivefold increase in numbers from the late 1970s to 2010.

Table 4. D.C. Think Tank Population Density at Beginning of Decades

Year	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Population density	1	5	8	11	23	33	53	99	171	236	264

The *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* was the first think tank to make D.C. its home in 1910. Existing for over a century to date, it is the oldest think tank in town. As the accumulated numbers in Table 4 illustrate, population density rose and yearly founding rates consistently exceeded disbanding rates (except for years when they cancelled each other out). From 1910 to 2010, D.C.'s think tank landscape witnessed a total of 276 foundings, but only twelve disbandings. While ten think tanks were merged into other organizations and did not entirely cease to exist in this sense, two closed down - only to reemerge about a decade later. All but one of the disbanded cases occurred after the mid-1980s. There is no systematic variation in disbanded think tanks' type.

The steady accumulation of think tanks until the early 1970s, when the structurally intermediate organizational form increasingly gained social legitimacy and political entrée, as well as the phenomenon of booming population growth ever since point to the capital city's impressive, possibly still unexhausted, environmental carrying capacity. The steady replenishing of the population stock by nascent entrepreneurs or their sponsors made think tanks ubiquitous actors in D.C.'s present-day organizational landscape.

The 1970s witnessed the founding of 46 think tanks, and an impressive 70 organizations popped up in D.C. during the 1980s. The emergence of another 65 think tanks took place in the 1990s, and D.C.'s think tank landscape was joined by 52 new organizations in the last decade. This proliferation can be seen as part of a broader civil society development, namely the growth of the American non-profit sector in general. From the mid-1960s to 2010, the number of non-profit organizations registered with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) increased more than eightfold, from roughly 100,000 to over 820,000, at a rate more than double that of for-profit businesses - with over 7,000 non-profits in the state of D.C. (cf. Berry 2007: 240, Urban Institute 2011). All of the detected 276 D.C. think tanks have in common their not-for-profit status. Mil-lions of dollars from grants or donations

aided their proliferation (cf. Rich 2004: 28). Interestingly, 188 D.C. think tanks (68%) are registered under the IRS tax code's single most attractive section 501(c)(3), which grants donors tax deductibility of their contributions to the fullest possible extent under American law (cf. Brody/Cordes 1999, Harvard Law Review 2002, Rich 2004: 11, Surrey 1973: 224, IRS 2010a). In practice, this means that if an individual - say with a marginal tax rate of 35 percent - contributes $1,000 to any thus registered think tank, she actually ends up paying only $650, with the charitable tax deduction of $350 effectively subsidized at the expense of tax payers (cf. Berry 2007: 236). For this very reason, the IRS legally forbids think tanks under this status to devote an ambiguously defined "substantial part" of activities to legislative lobbying, to support or oppose political candidates, or to outright "disseminate controversial or partisan propaganda" (Berry 2007: 241, cf. Harvard Law Review 2002: 1506, IRS 2010a). Eleven think tanks (4%) were registered under the alternative tax code section 501(c)(4), which basically allows lobbying without limits while not granting full tax deductibility. For 77 D.C. think tanks (28%), no tax code status could be identified.

As one would expect in the nation's capital, 197 - over two thirds - of D.C. think tanks (73%) were national in focus, meaning that their research, analysis, advice or advocacy predominantly aim at informing or shaping federal-level policies. The work of a notable 69 organizations (28%) displayed a visible international focus beyond that. Only two organizations (1%) strictly focused on the state or metropolitan area of D.C.

There is a conspicuous spatial closeness of D.C. think tanks to U.S. Congress as one of the most important centers of power in the political field. Since a precise address was detected for virtually all think tanks in the city, their geographical distance from the U.S. Capitol building could be measured by using cartographic distance calculation with Google Maps (cf. Draftlogic 2010, Google Inc. 2011). On average, D.C. think tanks were located within just 2.9 kilometers (1.8 miles) air-line distance from the halls of Congress. The *Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal and Economic Public Policy Studies* has the farthest distance with 10.2 kilometers (6.4 miles). With less than 400 meters distance (0.2 miles), *Human Rights First* and the *British American Security Information Council* are virtually located right off the Capitol's doorstep. Think tanks cluster "inside the beltway", a phrase both referring to D.C.'s area encircled by interstate highway 495 and the capital's tumultuous world of politicians, lobbyists or think tanks, which are spatially agglomerated especially around the east-west thoroughfare K Street - simultaneously close to politics and the media (cf. Rich 2004: 229, Wiarda 2008: 96).

Nearly all think tanks that have settled in D.C. over the years are single- or multi-issue in scope, namely 263 organizations (96%), concentrating for example on social and economic or environmental and foreign policy. Only eleven think tanks (4%) are full-service institutions, handy for "one-stop shopping" by journalists or Congressional staff on a full spectrum of policy issues (cf. Rich 2004: 92). Consequently, 32 think tanks (12%) can be called generalists in that their work tackles a wide, if not full, range of issue areas, displaying across-the-board research, analysis, advice or advocacy capabilities, conscious of cross-issue links. However, a significantly larger amount of 244 think tanks (88%) are specialists, whose expertise or activities concern only one or two specific issues, or a limited issue area[5].

The observed think tank proliferation seems to hold true nation- and worldwide. Several scholars use the explosion metaphor to describe U.S. think tanks' growth (cf. Harvard Law Review 2002: 1503, Hellebust 2007, McGann 2011: 16, Rich 2004: 72). Rich counts 306 organizations operative across the entire U.S. as of 1996 with his strict think tank definition (e.g. independence and no interest base), compared to 211 identified here for that year in D.C. alone (cf. Rich 2004: 14, 221, Table 1). A more recent count by McGann with his less discriminate definition (e.g. including affiliated entities), finds a whopping 1,816 think tank-alike U.S. entities as of 2010, compared to 264 detected here for that year in D.C. (cf. McGann 2011: 21, Table 1).

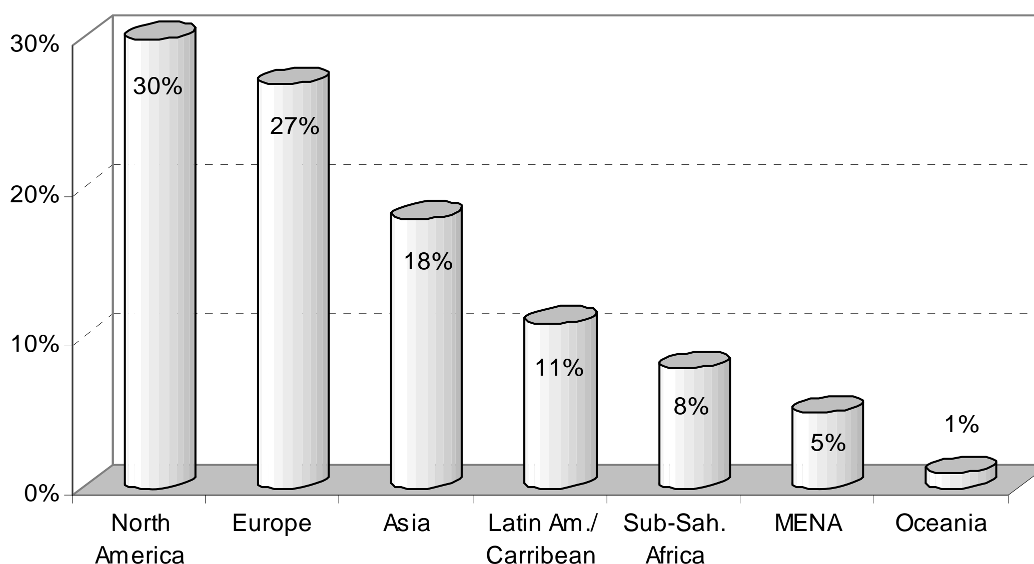

Figure 3. Global Distribution of Think Tank (-Alike) Entities by Region, 2010 (N=6480, data source: McGann 2011: 15)

[5] Several authors started to focus on specialist think tanks dealing with a specific issue-area. For example, there are analyses of think tanks' role specifically in social policy (see Alexander 2006, Gehlen 2005, Scott 1999, Stone 2001a, Wisensale 2005) or - a still relatively underexplored area in terms of systematic analyses - in foreign policy (see Abelson 1996, 2006, Ahmad 2008, Parmar 2005, Wiarda 2008).

As Figure 3 shows, McGann counts 6,480 think tank-alike entities worldwide for 2010, preponderantly based in North America (30%), a region closely followed only by Europe (27%), and the single biggest think tank host is the U.S., before China, India, the United Kingdom and Germany (cf. 2011: 5, 16, 18). Given the think tank definition employed here, Rich probably under- and McGann likely overestimates numbers. Still, their findings generally do support the view that D.C.'s think tank proliferation is valid nation-wide beyond the U.S. capital, and moreover applies globally to - at least the Northern - world regions (cf. McGann 2011: 6, Stone 2005: 3).

D.C.'s think tank population underwent formidable growth. But as one would expect from an evolutionary lens, "not all think tanks are created equal" (McGann 2009: 82). In fact, they are a "motley bunch" (Rich 2004: 86). Therefore, the pressing issue of which think tank *types* have empirically dominated over the years is explored next.

The Politicization of D.C. Think Tanks

To an eye-catching extent, D.C.'s think tank population became politicized over time. As Figure 4 shows, while centrist or not identifiably ideological academic or contract research think tanks with pronounced organizational objectivity dominated in D.C. for much of the twentieth century, they were outnumbered over the last decades by think tanks whose work is declaredly driven by a broadly conservative or liberal ideology.

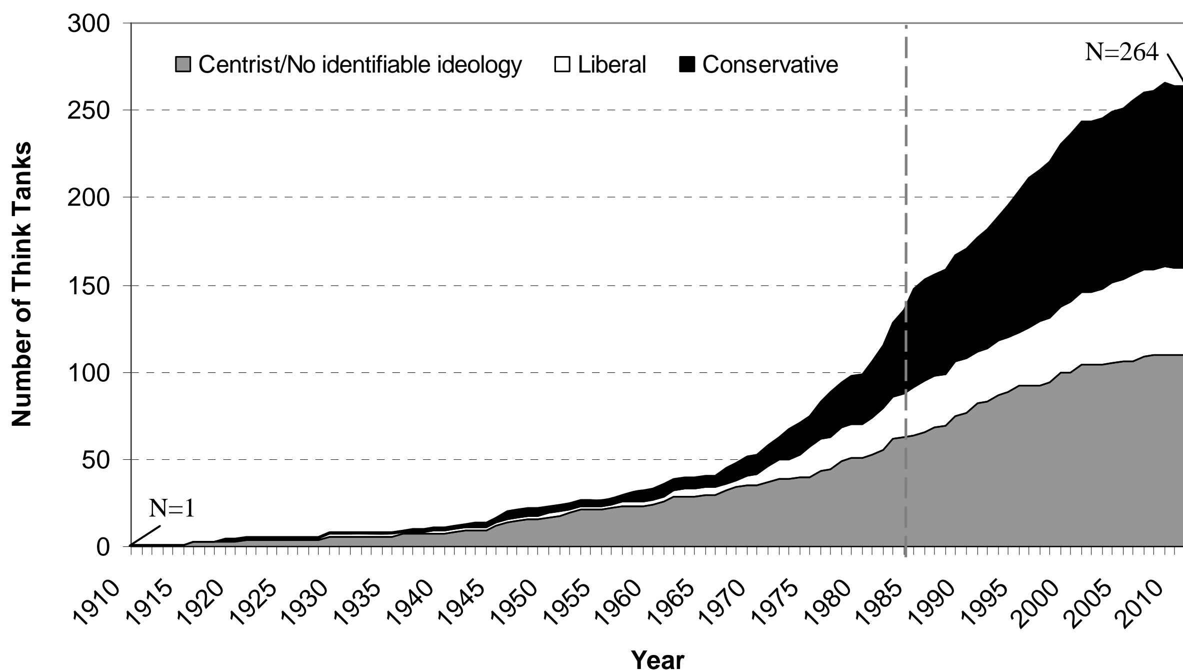

Figure 4. D.C. Think Tank Politicization, 1910-2010

The dashed line in Figure 4 marks the year 1982, the corresponding tipping point:

- centrist or not identifiably ideological think tanks dominated from 1910 to 1981,
- but since 1982, D.C.'s ideological think tanks consistently outnumber them.

To be more precise, of the 115 think tanks that existed by 1982, centrist or not identifiably ideological think tanks accounted for a near-half of the population with 55 such institutions (48%), as Figure 5 below depicts. But the balance was tilted towards a majority of 60 ideological think tanks (52%), conservative or liberal in their *Weltanschauung* - a phenomenon not reversed but consolidated after this tipping point year. This development clearly links up with the proliferation phenomenon discussed above.

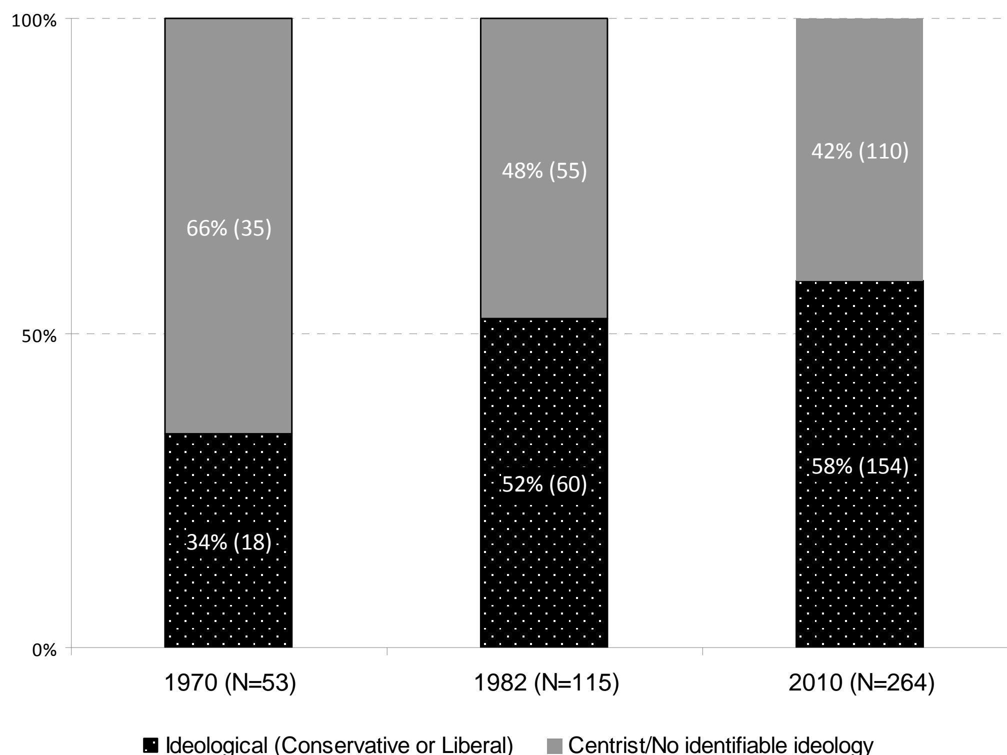

Figure 5. D.C. Think Tank Type Proportions in 1970, 1982, and 2010

At the outset of the 1970s, slightly over 50 think tanks had accumulated in the capital. As shown both in Figure 5 and Figure 6, two thirds (66%) of the 53 existing D.C. think tanks in 1970 were non-ideological, while conservative or liberal ones accounted for a mere third (34%) at that point in time. Astonishingly, however, amidst the trend of explosive population growth since the late 1970s, the disproportionate numerical increase of ideological advocacy

think tanks gradually tipped the balance in their favor - since 1982 - and nearly reversed these proportions as of 2010. Today, ideological - conservative or liberal - think tanks make up a clear majority (58%) of the 264 existing in D.C., and while numbers of non-ideological organizations actually grew in absolute terms, they now only account for less than half (42%) of all think tanks.

The picture that emerges clearly is that D.C.'s think tank population has become politicized to a considerable extent. In 2010, a clear-cut majority of organizations are advocacy think tanks, which deviate from the organizational objectivity criterion with their partisan pursuit or single-minded promotion of politico-ideological agendas.

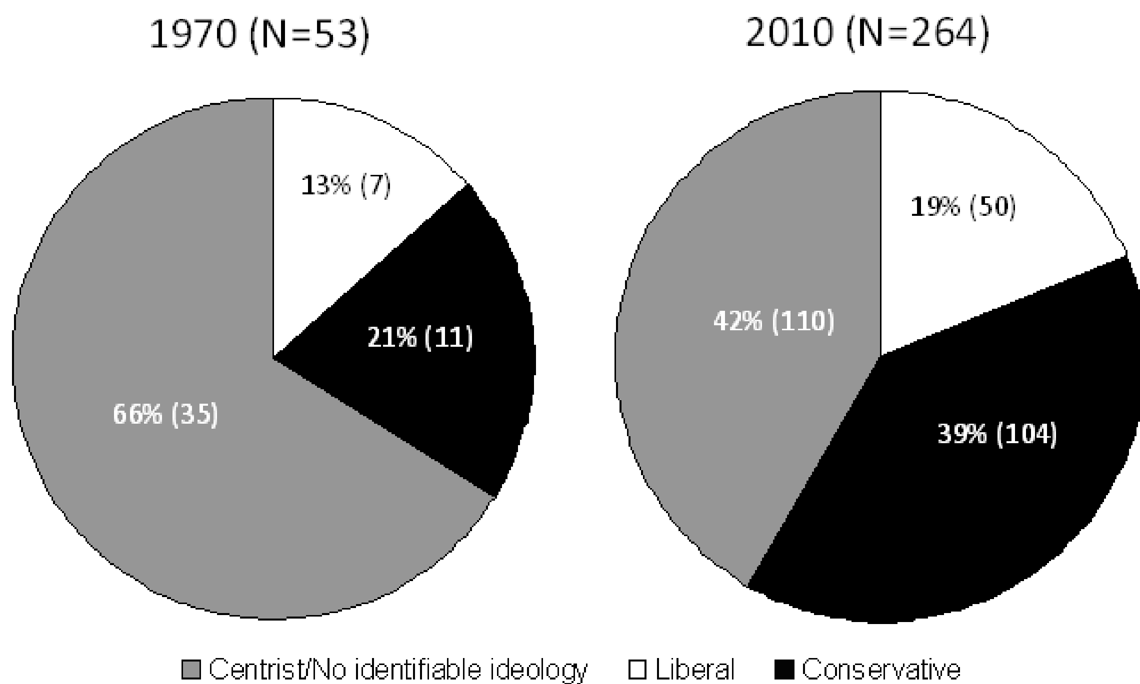

Figure 6. D.C. Think Tank Types in 1970 as opposed to 2010

As can be seen in Figure 6, academic or contract research think tanks coded as centrist or not identifiably ideological still constitute the single biggest stand-alone category in 2010. But the combined numbers of conservative and liberal think tanks considerably excel theirs. Most think tanks active in D.C. today make identifiably ideological references in their strategic communications. For instance, conservative think tanks often emphasize an organizational commitment to free markets, limited government or individual liberties, while liberal ones might call for government intervention and regulation or social justice - not every now and then as a result of research, but as an axiomatic matter of principle.

When zooming in on proportions within the realm of ideological think tanks, a further relevant empirical result of the analysis is that conservative organizations have come to occupy a population niche twice as big as that of liberal organizations by 2010. Figure 6 shows that of the 264 think tanks active in D.C. that year, 50 are liberal (19%) but 104 are conservative (39%) in terms of the political ideologies driving their efforts.
The year 1943 emerges as a durable tipping point for the ideological think tank niche:

- most of the handful of ideological think tanks from 1910 to 1942 were liberal,
- but D.C.'s conservative think tanks consistently outnumber them since 1943.

There were no significant differences of conservative and liberal think tanks in terms of their distance from Congress and scope or specialization of their activities. They are predominantly specialist organizations, single- or multi-issue in scope. Despite their lower numbers, twice as many liberal think tanks as conservative ones display a visible international focus beyond national-level activities (namely 14 as opposed to seven).

Virtually all ideological think tanks whose IRS tax code status was identified were registered under the aforementioned IRS tax code section 501(c)(3). Thus, despite their declared ideological proclivities, they are able to offer their donors full tax privileges. U.S. Department of Treasury regulations dating back to 1919 state that non-profits qualifying for this status must work for "religious, charitable, scientific, testing for public safety, literary, or educational purposes" (Berry 2007: 241, cf. IRS 2010a). Ideological think tanks generally manage to be granted this tax-exempt status by the IRS. They are exempted under the "educational" prong of the section, which merely demands a "full and fair exposition" of their viewpoint, no matter how particular the partisan or politico-ideological objectives are that they or their sponsors seek to advance (cf. Harvard Law Review 2002: 1506). Here and there, it is tax payers who subsidize deductions for donating individuals or foundations (cf. Berry 2007: 236).

A clear result of the analysis is that the main driver of politicization was the emergence of ideological - most often conservative - organizations after the late 1970s, when most newly founded think tanks adopted identifiably ideological missions. Of all 276 think tanks founded or based in D.C. over the last century, 113 were centrist or not identifiably ideological (41%), but a whopping 163 organizations were ideological (59%). The fact that disbanded think tanks' types do not systematically vary supports the result that it was

foundings by nascent entrepreneurs and their sponsors that were a most crucial driving factor of proliferation and politicization.

Just like proliferation, the politicization trend might well hold true U.S.-wide. Though developments after 1996 largely escape his measure, Rich presents similar findings for U.S. think tanks up until then (cf. Rich 2001a, 2004, 2006). The politicization result here is thus probably externally valid for American think tanks more generally, located from the East- to the West Coast.

It has been empirically retraced how D.C.'s think tank population underwent a historical process of branching out into two main organizational niches, with non-ideological academic "universities without students" or "knowledge on demand" think tanks on one hand, and ideological - conservative or liberal - advocacy think tanks on the other hand. D.C.'s carrying capacity for ideological think tanks proved high, and the successive crowding of the ideological niche is a remarkable evolutionary development. The point is: ideologues have not replaced but vastly outnumbered academics in D.C.'s think tank world. Its evolution is chronicled next in a more qualitative way, adding a "face" to discussed think tank numbers by selectively highlighting relevant think tank actors and environmental developments. The politicization finding is elucidated by tracing in some detail the environmental dynamics and evolutionary processes at play.

The Evolution of D.C. Think Tanks

The evolutionary approach views D.C. think tanks as embedded agents, interwoven with their political, legal, media, intellectual, cultural and resource environments. Located in a structurally intermediate position between fields of power, they are both driven by environmental changes, and active drivers of unfolding processes themselves.

The organizational think tank form emerged in the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth century, predominantly in the East Coast cities New York and D.C. (cf. Braml 2006: 13, Smith 1991a). The U.S. Constitution had been signed over a century before, and the American federal republic with two main, but relatively weak, political parties was bound for a trajectory of democratic consolidation. As Alexis de Tocqueville had famously reported a while before, opportunities for all sorts of civil society organizations looked favorable (cf. 1835, Stone 2001a: 344).

Scholars try to distinguish different, if not perfectly distinct, "waves" of think tank formation (cf. Abelson 2000, Weaver 1989). The academic policy research institutes of the

first wave originated in civil society as alternative modern systems of knowledge-production (cf. Anheier 2010: 338-339). Their inception can be interpreted as an intentional variation from American universities and colleges, which were preoccupied with classical truth-seeking and character formation at the time, but unreceptive to applying modern - "value-neutral" - social science for devising solutions to the nation's policy- and social problems (Whitaker 2006).

In 1910, Andrew Carnegie founded the *Carnegie Endowment* with a start-up gift of $10 million (an endowment was added only later) to carry out scholarly foreign policy research in order to "hasten the abolition of international war, the foulest blot upon our civilization"[6]. While founded over a century ago, it fits the think tank definition employed here without conceptual stretching (cf. Sartori 1970). Late nineteenth-century Congresses were politically polarized, producing patronage and corruption. But Carnegie's low-profile think tank had no identifiably ideological mission and tended to operate under an "aegis of scientific 'knowledge for practice' rather than partisan politics" (Bertelli/Wenger 2008: 229, cf. Stone 2005: 4).

The appearance of private philanthropy enabled foundings of further think tanks. John Rockefeller chartered the Rockefeller Foundation in 1913, which soon possessed a $180 million endowment, intended to "promote well-being and to advance civilization" (Rich 2004: 39). Its money - made in the Industrial Revolution - helped create the *Institute for Government Research* in 1916 with a mission to "pursue a non-partisan, efficient administrative state" - to de-politicize the political process (2004: 38). Other industrial Era businessmen like Carnegie or J.P. Morgan donated, sharing the view that a growing government requires "efficiency in operation" (Willoughby 1918: 60). In fact, the *Institute*'s charter explicitly stated that the U.S. government - led by Democrat Woodrow Wilson throughout World War I - would need an "agency dependent neither upon politics nor upon an average public intelligence" (Rich 2004: 38). This view was not free of an elitist and anti-political smack, valuing experts over allegedly "inferior" popular opinion. But businessmen had a reason to select organizationally objective think tanks producing non-partisan expertise. Next to well-endowed philanthropists, the country's sweeping industrial growth brought about social and economic instability - poverty and inequality - and businessmen sought to avoid popular mobilization that could jeopardize their continued success (cf. 2004: 36).

[6] All citations from think tanks' mission statements or historical narratives in this section are taken from the publicly available strategic communications on their respective websites, unless otherwise indicated.

While functionalist accounts alone - common in the interest group literature - of a governmental “information imperative” creating its own supply appear foreshortened, policymakers in the U.S. presidential system with weak parties did indeed trust or request civil society actors like think tanks to interface with or assist government (McGann 2002: 16, cf. Abelson 2000: 223, Weiss 1992). During the 1900s, Republicans had majorities in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives[7]. In Congress alone, there were 100 senators and 435 representatives with dozens of aides as important think tank access points (cf. Abelson 2000: 223). Think tank leaders considered cultural capital as their prime asset, partly fearing popular criticism of their capitalist foundings (cf. Rich 2004: 41). They selected non-political strategies, and created boards of trustees with academics and across-the-aisle politicians (cf. 2004: 38).

Dominated by the Democrats, Congress enacted a 1917 law granting tax deduction to those who donate to qualifying non-profits. First ideological variations occurred in the population via new think tank foundings in the late 1910s. The liberal *Century Foundation* advocated government intervention to alleviate economic inequalities in a declaredly “not neutral” way. The *Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace*, whose founder Herbert Hoover went on to become U.S. president, retained a scholarly appearance but took a conservative organizational stance, portraying individual liberties or limited government as the alleged “American way of life”.

However, most foundings at this early stage emulated an academic, middle-of-the-road think tank model. For instance, the *Council on Foreign Relations* gained cultural capital by publishing a scholarly journal - *Foreign Affairs* - and stressed that it “takes no institutional positions on matters of policy” (Grose 2006: 9, 12). Similarly, *Brookings* embodied a prototypical “university without students” or “ink tank” with a mission to bring “’science’ to the study of government” at the time. Enabled by a Rockefeller Foundation grant in the 1920s, when Republicans held Congressional majorities, it resulted from a 1927 merger of Robert Brookings’ various projects: the *Institute for Government Research*, the *Institute of Economics* and, tellingly, a graduate school (cf. Rich 2004: 40, Rocco 2009, Smith 1991a: 52, 1991b). As U.S. president Lyndon Johnson later on put it, *Brookings* staff struggled for its capital “by painstaking research, by objective writing, by an imagination that questioned the ‘going’ way of doing things, and then they proposed alternatives” (quoted after Rich 2004: 1).

Wall Street crashed in 1929 during Hoover’s presidency. The Great Depression swept the country throughout the 1930s, when Democrats predominated in Congress. Under

[7] Congressional majorities in this section as of U.S. Senate 2011 or U.S. House of Representatives 2011.

Democrat Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, historic New Deal policies were initiated. "Substantial" lobbying was made illegal for tax-exempt think tanks. In the late 1930s, Henry Ford chartered the Ford Foundation that soon became one of the largest think tank financiers. The non-ideological *Urban Land Institute* was founded to engage in land use research. New ideological think tanks emerged. The conservative *Tax Foundation* set out to promote "a set of 'tax consciousness' in the public" by "educating Americans" about how New Deal fiscal policy would harm the business sector. Contrarily, the liberal legacy-based *Roosevelt Institute* precisely defended interventionism.

While World War II preoccupied the country and its capital from 1939 to 1945, Democrats maintained control of Congress. The surprise Japanese military attack against the Hawaiian U.S. Pearl Harbor naval base in the early 1940s was a "catalyzing event" for several think tanks (Parmar 2005). Eleanor Roosevelt and Republican presidential nominee Wendell Willkie endorsed the founding of the not identifiably ideological *Freedom House* to rally "popular support" for U.S. intervention in the war on the "great totalitarian evil, Nazism," and to promote political rights and civil liberties.

The conservative *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research* deliberately broke with the organizational objectivity norm, still valued by most policy-makers and think tank sponsors at the time. It saw itself "at the intersection of scholarship and politics" with a mission to pursue "limited government, competitive markets, and individual freedom" as "unchanging ideals". Conservative organizations started outnumbering liberal ones by 1943, though the non-ideological think tank model still predominated (see section 4.2.). It was retained for instance by the *Federation of American Scientists*, the *National Academy on an Ageing Society* or the *American Institutes for Research*, all founded in the mid-1940s.

After World War II, a second wave of contract research think tanks produced "knowledge on demand", mainly for the federal government (cf. Weaver 1989: 218). Adhering to conventions of social scientific research, they effectively rerouted the flow of information in D.C. policymaking as expanding government departments contracted out more research, analysis or advice (cf. Mulgan 2006: 150, Rocco 2009: 2). Federal spending on research and development (R&D) grew from $2.9 billion in 1947 to $31.8 billion by 1967 (in constant 1990 dollars, cf. Rich 2004: 62). Founded in 1948, *RAND* thrived on R&D dollars of the U.S. Department of Defense (cf. Ahmad 2008: 531).

Republicans predominated in Congress in the late 1940s, when their U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy stirred up fears of communism by shepherding scores of intellectuals into

politicized hearings about their alleged "treason" of the country (cf. Lipset 1981: 365). *Freedom House* outspokenly opposed this trend back then. New centrist think tanks formed in the early 1950s, including the *Aspen Institute*, the Rockefeller-backed *Population Council* and *Resources for the Future*, D.C.'s first environmental think tank, jump-started with a large one-off Ford Foundation grant (cf. Rich 2004: 58).

Nearly 30 think tanks had accumulated in D.C. by the mid-1950s. The Ford Foundation's assets reached $474 billion. To the benefit of non-ideological think tanks, its sponsoring ethic was "if there's a problem, let's study it" (2004: 61). Republican Dwight Eisenhower was U.S. president, but Democrats regained control of Congress, which lasted throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 1954, "intellectual entrepreneur" William Baroody became the leader of the *American Enterprise Institute*, which was on the verge of shutting down. Baroody managed to attract conservative staff, supply-side economist Milton Friedman as board member, plus the *Wall Street Journal*'s attention.

Politics became increasingly divisive with international Cold War bloc thinking and rising domestic conservatism, doubting not only the effectiveness but desirability of administrative solutions to social problems (cf. Pierson/Skocpol 2007). Democrat John Kennedy was elected U.S. president in 1961, when previous *RAND* staffer Herman Kahn opened the conservative *Hudson Institute* to avowedly push for increased U.S. military strength. His book "*On Thermonuclear War*", strategizing full-blown nuclear warfare, was instantly criticized as a "tract on how to justify mass murder" rather than a piece of solid research (see Kahn 1960). The phrase "thinking the unthinkable" originates here (cf. Safire 2008: 771, Comfort 1995: 610).

Kahn's conservative dispositions were explicitly countered by the liberal *Institute for Policy Studies*, founded in the early 1960s by Marcus Raskin and Richard Barnet, who met serving in the Kennedy administration. They wanted to contribute their part to the "politics of ideas in the capital", pressing for lower defense spending. The fact that neither Kahn nor Raskin and Barnet held Ph.D.s - think tankers' traditional degree up until then - illustrates the selection process of decreasing academic priorities. The civil rights movement took the capital in 1963 with the Martin Luther King-led March on Washington. After U.S. president Kennedy's subsequent assassination, Johnson took over and Congress enacted his Great Society policies addressing poverty. The country was sucked into the foggy, costly and divisive Vietnam War, as "sexual, gender, and cultural revolutions were roiling American society" (Rubin 2005: 83). Johnson prevailed in the 1964 election against conservative Barry

Goldwater, whose chief adviser was Baroody of the *American Enterprise Institute* (cf. Waters 2006a: 852).

By the late 1960s, think tanks enjoyed wider name recognition when their continuous growth grabbed *New York Times* front pages (see section 2.1.). Conservative establishments still popped up all over D.C. The *Fund for American Studies* portrayed free markets as the "essence of the American political tradition". The *Reason Foundation* advocated limited government or "individual choice in all areas of human activity".

A 1968 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development bill kicked off a new resource niche for social program evaluation. "Money created the industry", the director of the then-founded centrist *Urban Institute* recalls (Rich 2004: 48). Imitating *RAND*, it aspired to evidence-based "real alternatives to 'junk research'". But with financial government-backing, its research actually pointed to several social program failures, adding to conservatives' mounting welfare attacks (cf. 2004: 49). Congressional language also created the non-ideological, legacy-based *Woodrow Wilson Inter-national Center for Scholars* that year as a "living memorial" to the ex-president and "bridge between the worlds of learning and public affairs". A decade of civil disobedience, youth counter-culture and equality struggles culminated in King's murder.

Congress passed a Tax Reform Act in 1969, when Republican Richard Nixon won the White House. It unmistakably forbid private foundation support of efforts that "influence the outcome" of legislation or political campaigns (cf. 2004: 57). It can be said of American philanthropists that "no upper class of modern times has made so many funds available for intellectual activity" (Lipset 1981: 364). Nonetheless, Representative Wright Patman voiced his indignation about the Ford- or Rockefeller Foundation's alleged politics, equating millionaires' charitable giving with tax evasion: "Put most bluntly, philanthropy - one of mankind's most noble instincts - has been perverted into a vehicle for institutionalized, deliberate evasion of fiscal and moral responsibility to the nation" (quoted after Rich 2004: 57-58). Think tanks realized the reform could harm foundation support. *Brookings'* president even testified before Congress on the matter. In a letter, John Rockefeller Jr. insisted he had often paid nearly ten percent of his adjusted gross income voluntarily despite qualifying for unlimited deduction. "One wonders what reaction Mr. Rockefeller expects", Democrat Patman reciprocated, "a silence respectful of his family's economic power; hosannas of praise at his generosity in paying a tax at a rate one-third of that of the poorest of us; pleas that he abandon such arduous self-sacrifice and cease paying any tax whatsoever?" (quoted after 2004: 59).

Congressional scrutiny of civil society activities dampened large foundations' think tank support. At the outset of the 1970s, two thirds of the over 50 D.C. think tanks were non-ideological, while ideological ones accounted for a good third (see section 4.2., cf. Figure 5 or 6). Government was still predominantly viewed as a necessary, if imperfect, manager of socio-political problems by most Democrats and Republicans, whose macroeconomic thinking derived from the paradigmatic work of economist John Keynes (cf. Rich 2004: 9, see Keynes 1936). Even Nixon, who stepped down after the 1974 Watergate affair, once proclaimed "we are all Keynesians now" (Lewis 1976).

From then on, however, the momentous third wave of advocacy think tanks with identifiably liberal or, in most cases, conservative ideology started to populate D.C., which no longer retained "a barrier between policy research and political advocacy" (Weaver 1989: 219, cf. Stone 2005: 4, 2001b: 18, see Abelson 1995). In the intellectual and political environment, conservatives now challenged the Keynesian near-consensus, advocating selective readings of Adam Smith's work, monetarism or supply-side economics à la Friedman (see Friedman 1962, Smith 1776). A growing infrastructure of conservative think tanks both reflected and fueled the reformist cause for unfettered markets and deregulation, often wrapping their *Weltanschauung* in narratives of the nation's alleged historical tenets or supposed "American values" (Rich 2004: 4, cf. Lip-set 1981: 367, Smith/Marden 2008: 699). They took serious free-market economist Friedrich von Hayek's dictum not to go into politics but to "focus instead on the world of ideas" (Goodman 2010: 3). Predictably, this led to counter-ideological efforts of liberal entities in a sort of "self-supporting cycle" keeping conservative and liberal think tanks on the offensive against each other (Lipset 1981: 368).

The conservative former Congress staffers Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner opened *Heritage*'s doors in 1973. It is D.C.'s prototypical advocacy think tank, located in under 800 meters (0.5 miles) distance from Congress. Financed by beer magnate Joseph Coors and other wealthy conservative benefactors, its founding got off to a good start and marks an important evolutionary *turning point* (cf. Edwards 2003, Schneider 2006: 383). It did not even try to keep up a façade of organizational objectivity. Rather, research was pursued as a mere means to the end of making the principled case for "free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense". *Heritage*'s organizational autobiography frames the following anecdote as a trigger event for Weyrich and Feulner's nascent entrepreneurship. They received a helpful policy report after (instead of timely before) a related Senate voted on the subject matter, the story goes, and were frustrated with what they perceived as a "lack of policy-relevant conservative research". The report

came from the *American Enterprise Institute*. It had intentionally delayed it not to influence the vote, fearing loss of its tax-exempt status after Baroody's aforementioned campaigning advice (cf. Rich 2004: 54). *Heritage* discarded such cautiousness, introducing the so-called "brief case test" for marketing its research products as issues arose: "Members of Congress had to be able to take a copy (…) from their briefcases and read it completely in the fifteen minutes journey from Reagan National Airport to Capitol Hill" (O'Connor 2007: 11, cf. McCombs 1983). Putting "value judgments center stage", *Heritage* was less interested in academically qualified than ready-to-hit-the-ground-running staff. It became the avant-garde organization laying the ideological groundwork for the American conservative revolution that would blossom a decade later (Speth 2006: 4).

Many conservative think tanks fused free-market ideas with social conservatism. By the 1970s, "reborn" evangelical Christians had mobilized in earthly politics. Fundamentalist preachers like Jerry Falwell presumed to speak for a "moral majority" critical of leftist anti-war students, homosexual and Supreme Court-backed abortion rights, premarital sex or affirmative action, all of which would lead the country into ungodly "chaos" and "disorder" (cf. Ricci 1993, Wisensale 2005: 98). Conservative D.C. think tanks joined calls for putting Jesus Christ and a - particularly translated and literally interpreted - "Bible back into public policy" (Smith/Marden 2008: 709).

Conservative think tanks formed along these lines include the "abortion-preventing" *Americans United for Life* or the *Ethics and Public Policy Center*, applying a fixed "Judeo-Christian moral tradition" to all things public policy. The *Traditional Values Coalition* "educates" interested policymakers about the importance of the "God-ordained institution of the family", free enterprise and peculiar ways to "cure" homosexuality. Edward Crane founded the libertarian *Cato Institute* - conspicuously modeled on *Heritage* - with billionaire Charles Koch's support. He realized that for "a relatively small amount of money, if it's done properly, you can get your ideas on the table in a national debate through a think tank" (Rich 2004: 55, cf. Theroux 2006). Faithfully, *Cato* advocated tax cuts, welfare cuts and, lastly, free markets as the "most effective social welfare institution that mankind's ever seen". Liberal intellectuals were frequently portrayed as "antagonistic to business" (Lipset 1981: 332).

Positions of liberal think tanks, increasingly on the defensive, hardened within this cultural - and increasingly competitive - context (cf. Feldman 2007, Rubin 2005: 81, Stone 2001a: 343). Liberal organizations founded in D.C. during the 1970s include the "feminist" *Center for Women Policy Studies*, the *Center for Policy Alternatives*, campaigning

specifically for "gay and lesbian Americans" or "reproductive justice for women", as well as the *Center for International Policy*, pressing for principled "demilitarization".

During the 1980s, Republican Ronald Reagan was U.S. president. Congress was split. By 1982, the population balance had permanently tipped towards ideological think tanks (see section 4.2., cf. Figure 4, 5). Under Reagan, think tankers moved in and out of the "revolving door" of politics (cf. Safire 2008: 322, Comfort 1995: 520). He directly appointed dozens of *American Enterprise Institute* staffers and many authors of the twenty-volume *Heritage* study series "*Mandate for Leadership: Policy Management in a Conservative Administration*" joined the administration (cf. Schneider 2006: 384, Burch 1997). Political parties were still relatively weak at the time, leaving further openings for think tanks in the political field of power (cf. Braml 2006: 8, see Cohen et al. 2002, Green/Herrnson 2002, Crotty 1984, and Wattenberg 1986 for the historical development of American parties).

Pivotal changes in the funding environment mainly benefited conservative think tanks and played out to the detriment of non-ideological ones (cf. Waters 2006b: 318). U.S. Department of Defense R&D dollars had sharply declined from $31.8 billion in 1967 to $21.8 billion by 1980 (in constant 1990 dollars), and contract research was no longer a matter of "ask and you shall receive" (Lederman/Windus 1971: 13, cf. Rich 2004: 62). Ford Foundation resources also shrunk with oil shocks and the troubled economy of the 1970s. Moreover, its interest in funding centrist think tanks faded as the sponsoring ethos became "if there's a problem, let's do something about it" after an internal leadership change (2004: 61). Meanwhile, the business sector underwent renewed political mobilization. It defined its interests in more collective language and often vocally opposed government regulation (cf. 2004: 49). Conservative think tanks could tap into resources of ideologically-inclined private foundations like the Bradley, Koch, Lilly, Olin, Scaife, Lambe, Smith Richardson and Reason Foundations, and diversified their funding portfolios with broader-based individual support (cf. 2004: 64, Waters 2006b: 319). *Heritage*'s Feulner described his policy of individual fundraising this way: "I was not going to run around having to defend us institutionally (…) for being a stooge of a small handful of major fatcats" (quoted after Rich 2004: 65). This intra-organizational variation soon diffused to other think tanks. In the mid-1980s, *Brookings* enlarged its executive seminar program to capture more corporate contributions, another much-emulated departure from usual fundraising routines (cf. 2004: 66).

In the 1980s, explosive population growth overwhelmingly meant politicized foundings (see section 4.2.). By way of example, *Freedom Works*' slogan made no secret of institutional proclivities: "Lower Taxes. Less Government. More Freedom." The *Americans*

for Tax Reform Foundation opposed “all tax increases as a matter of principle” while the legacy-based *Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights* stylized individual liberties the as “moral basis for a fully free, laissez-faire capitalist society”. The social conservative *Family Research Council* presented marriage as “seedbed of virtue”. Conservative think tanks energetically spearheaded movements against immigration, affirmative action or campus multiculturalism. They supported research trying to establish links between race and intelligence and rallied for welfare cutbacks, displaying little or “no mercy” for America’s poor or societal “loosers”, often portrayed as those lacking “initiative to take care of themselves” (Farmer 2006: 24, see Covington 1997, Delagdo/Stefancic 1996). On the liberal front, the *Economic Policy Institute* opened its doors to “expose inequalities” and remind policymakers that “government must play an active role in protecting the economically vulnerable”. The *Institute for Women’s Policy Research* was an early-on promoter of principled “gender equity”.

The Cold War’s end saw government resources for contract research further cur-tailed. The generalist *RAND* became less reliant on military R&D, while the centrist *Urban Institute* severely struggled for sustaining its economic capital (cf. Rich 2004: 67). It introduced an intra-organizational variation of also bidding overseas, adopted by many internationally oriented think tanks like the centrist *International Crisis Group*. Under the presidency of Republican George Bush Sr., a U.S.-led military coalition en-gaged in the Persian Gulf War against Iraq, with D.C. think tanks skeptic or supportive.

Conservative entities started subsuming reputedly “liberal” topics under their auspices. Examples are the free-market-promoting *Independent Women’s Institute*, the *Islamic Free Market Institute*, engaging Muslims in “the conservative agenda”, as well as *Project 21*, presuming to speak for family- or free-market-oriented African-Americans supposedly marginalized “by the nation’s civil rights establishment”.

Under Democrat Bill Clinton’s presidency, think tanks hotly debated his ideas on welfare reform as Republicans managed to recapture Congress. Think tank managers closely followed changes in the media environment throughout the 1990s. To kill two birds with one stone, more resources went into “quick, reliable and easy-to-understand” research, pleasing journalist and busy politicians alike - let alone of donors seeking visible returns on their investments or think tanks’ increasingly corporate, quick-win-oriented boards of directors (Anheier 2010: 339). In a community context, D.C. think tanks had to compete for attention against increasingly media-savvy public policy schools or university-affiliated research institutes in the knowledge-producing field of power. *Brookings* launched a new series of policy briefs, positively *selecting* the sleek marketing style of *Heritage*, *Cato* and the like (cf.

Rich 2004: 220). By 2001, *Brookings* had a full-fledged in-house television studio, arranging its experts on news shows, and the *American Enterprise Institute* now produced less and shorter books, more news-paper op-eds and - less cautious - met with many Congress staffers (cf. 2004: 68, 207).

At the turn of the millennium, over 230 - predominantly ideological - think tanks existed in D.C. (see section 4.1., cf. Table 4). In 2001, the September 11 terror attacks in New York City and D.C. led to soaring levels of patriotism and further united conservatives as a consequential “catalyzing event” (Parmar 2005, cf. Farmer 2006: 26). Republican U.S. president George Bush Jr. decided to militarily engage in the so-called “war on terrorism” in Afghanistan. His Vice President, Dick Cheney, called upon neo-conservative foreign policy think tanks to once again help “to think about the unthinkable, to focus on what, in fact, the terrorists may have in store for us” (quoted after Saffire 2008: 771). In 2003, a U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq on dubious grounds as think tanks again either rallied around the flag or voiced their skepticism or disapproval.

The liberal *Center for American Progress* critiqued “policy that stems from conservative values” while imitating *Heritage*’s advocacy format. Democrat Hillary Clinton endorsed it, expressing liberal discontent with the fact that “the other side created an infrastructure that has come to dominate the political discourse” (Dreyfuss 2004: 20). Strikingly, much discourse in the political- or media environment at the time similarly framed “the world as a place of polar opposites” with “no shades of grey” (Coe et al. 2004: 234). U.S. president Bush had famously declared before Congress that “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush 2001). And ideological think tanks like the conservative *Committee on the Present Danger*, the *Religious Freedom Coalition* as well as the *Foreign Policy Initiative*, which advocated “American exceptionalism” by insisting the U.S. is the “indispensable nation”, fuelled or echoed such binary communications (cf. Alterman 2003, Beinart 2006, Lakoff 2004, McGann 2004: 14).

Think tanks’ sustained proliferation in the 2000s can be understood as an extension of the third wave of advocacy organizations that further crowded the population’s ideological niche, and scrambled for money from sympathetic benefactors. The conservative *Center for Union Facts* was founded to “educate” policymakers about the allegedly pervasive “criminal activity of the labor movement”. The *Americans for Prosperity Foundation* joined scores of advocates for “cutting taxes and government”. Republican Newt Gingrich founded the conservative *American Solutions for Winning the Future*. Among the advocated “real, significant solutions” are tax cuts or abolishing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The liberal *Institute for Policy Studies* declaredly attacks what it calls "false solutions to global warming", while the conservative *Citizens for a Sound Economy* outright rejects all scientific literature, claiming that "global warming is a verdict in search of evidence". In fact, roughly 90 percent of U.S. conservative think tanks espouse "environmental skepticism" (Peter et al. 2008: 349).

Corporate multimedia giants like Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, Viacom or Time Warner with its "communication empire" dominated the media landscape, making frequent use of think tank "experts" in their broadcasting (McPhail 2007: 72). Moreover, think tanks had visibly conquered the internet, and virtually all of them came to use the medium for strategic communications, as a research platform, or simply as a "new frontier" of politicized policy battles (2007: 301). Social media like Facebook seem to be used more for networking and marketing rather than significant fundraising.

Congress was split when the 2008 financial crisis hit, introducing what *Brookings* called "the Great Recession". Its causes and effects were polemically debated or scientifically explored, as by the centrist *Peterson Institute for International Economics*. The conservative *Economic Policies for the 21st Century* once again set out to "advance free enterprise", as a great many think tanks had done before. Liberal think tanks, with economist Paul Krugman, again invoked the "greatness of Keynes" (Krugman 2008).

Democrat Barack Obama won the White House in 2009 amidst a still poorly integrated political party system. Think tanks like the liberal *Institute for Policy Studies* cheered. Some conservative think tanks spent resources on opposition research. For instance, the conservative *Accuracy in Media* "educated" people about Obama's alleged "secret political life and agenda" in what resembles a textbook case of a smear campaign. The liberal *Institute for Public Accuracy* or *Media Matters for America* with its counter-ideological mission of "correcting conservative misinformation" reciprocated.

Some D.C. think tanks expanded to other countries or reached out to likeminded institutions abroad. D.C.'s first think tank - the centrist *Carnegie Endowment* - is "pioneering the global think tank" with subsidiaries in Moscow, Beijing, Beirut and Brussels. The conservative *Atlas Economic Research Foundation* connects "a global network of more than 400 free-market organizations in over 80 countries" (cf. Benner et al. 2000, 2004).

Over the years, the American capital city "has become a noisy policy bazaar", filled with an ample diversity of think tanks (McGann/Johnson 2005: 11). Each and every day, policymakers, journalists and American citizens are confronted with a dizzying array of public policy-oriented research, analysis, advice or advocacy. Non-ideological academic or

contract research think tanks carved out a niche in social space for themselves, assisting the government or its bureaucracies in producing or processing scientific research or policy ideas. Plainly ideological think tanks similarly managed to wrestle a degree of autonomy for themselves and thrived in the last decades' resource, cultural, intellectual, media, legal and political environments. Time and again, they engage in the single-minded pursuit of politico-ideological goals on everything from taxes to foreign affairs to the environment and religion to government size or -social programs. At the end of the 2000s, D.C. think tanks were "often as partisan, as ideological, and as divisive as is the nation as a whole" (Wiarda 2008: 97).

By 2010, there were 264 diverse but oftentimes politicized think tanks in D.C. (see section 4, cf. Table 4). Therefore, the answer - cross-validated with quantitative and qualitative analysis - to this paper's guiding research question is:

D.C. think tanks have become politicized for the most part from 1910 to 2010. There has been an explosive growth of think tanks generally in terms of sheer numbers. Yet broadly liberal and conservative advocacy think tanks disproportionately proliferated, compared to academic or contract research think tanks. Ideological think tanks now do not replace but vastly outnumber non-ideological ones.

5. Outlook

The empirical findings unequivocally confirm the hypothesis that since organizationally objective think tanks emerged in the U.S. capital over a century ago, D.C.'s think tank landscape as a whole has become visibly politicized over the last decades. So what? This last section sounds out scholarly and practical implications of the non-trivial result.

Research Implications

Unqualified notions of think tanks as transmitters of neutral knowledge or objective problem-solvers that think original thoughts are not convincing within the U.S. context. It is tempting but not analytically conducive to conceptualize them as places in civil society where wisdom resides, taking for granted their policy "enlightenment function" (Weiss 1977, cf. Carothers 1999, Whitaker 2006). Think tanks in the American capital are ambiguous social and organizational phenomena. They can indeed provide a home for the best and the brightest academics or practitioners. At their best, they try to reunite the qualities of the practically

minded policy wonk with those of the technically versed "stiff staffer steeped in study" (Saffire 2008: 553). However, as has been shown, D.C. think tanks are purposive agents of ideologies more often than not. Empirically speaking, they have organizationally transformed from open-minded truth-seekers into hard-headed advocates of a broadly liberal or conservative worldview. They apply politico-ideological principles of economic interventionism and social justice or, far more often, free markets, limited government and individual liberties as supposedly "permanent truths, transcending human experience," to all things public policy (Smith 1989: 192). As is probably true for civil society generally, D.C.'s think tank landscape today hosts "a bewildering array of the good, the bad, and the outright bizarre" (Carothers 1999). It is crucial to demystify think tanks, for organizational boundaries in social space have become blurred to say the least (cf. Stone 2007). The working definition proposed here does not solve the dilemma of definition. Scholars will probably face the taxonomical challenge of better defining and classifying think tanks for some time to come.

All too often, inadequate attention is paid to think tanks' politics dimension. Andrew Rich proposed a viable way to empirically assess their politicization (see 2004). His finding of U.S. think tanks' considerable politicization on grounds of 1996 data is strongly supported by the new primary data for D.C. presented in this paper. Given that the capital harbors most of the country's think tanks, the result of politicization in D.C. might very well enjoy external validity and still hold true nation-wide. The evolutionary approach to organizational studies offers fruitful concepts for analyzing why organizational populations change over time. It helps to elucidate think tanks as embedded agents, focusing analytic attention on the interplay of think tanks as goal-oriented actors on the one hand, and their environmental constraints and opportunities on the other hand. The patterned proliferation and politicization of D.C. think tanks can be understood as a historically contingent outcome of continuous evolutionary variations and Darwinian processes of selection, retention and struggle:

- The driving factor for developments were changes in think tanks' resource environment - the varying levels or differential availability of money by businesses, the government, private foundations and wealthy individuals over time.
- Contributing factors were a relatively weak American party system, frequent partisan polarization in the political environment, and relevant changes in the intellectual, cultural, media and legal - particularly tax - environments over time.
- D.C.'s think tank world became politicized mainly via ideological foundings by nascent entrepreneurs and their sponsors rather than intra-organizational change.

Practical Implications

Think tanks have become ubiquitous phenomena in D.C.'s organizational landscape. But, as has been shown, it is wholly inaccurate to infer from their numerical proliferation that more high-quality expertise than ever is now available for U.S. policymakers. The work of world-renowned centrist, standard-setting D.C. think tanks like *Brookings* or *RAND* serves as a daily reminder of the organizational form's largely untapped potential for assisting in the societal flow of ideas and information in a meaningful way. However, the last decades' sustained wave of advocacy think tanks has swamped the city with a morass of deeply politicized, unreliable or downright sloppy policy research and analysis, which frequently serves to hysterize rather than scrutinize policy debates. Academic-style "universities without students" - the "ink tanks" - and contract-reliant "knowledge on demand" think tanks now coexist alongside a major infrastructure of avowedly liberal and above all conservative think tanks "out to impose their own monologue" with a warrior vision of politics (Abelson 2000: 220).

Current U.S. president Obama publicly complains about what he calls the "industry of insult", drowning out more moderate voices, and reminisces about foregone days of bipartisan civility in D.C. and America's reputed "tradition that stretched from the days of the country's founding to the glory of the civil rights movement, a tradition based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart" (quoted after Kloppenberg 2011: 180-181).

It is open to question to what extent D.C. think tanks espouse a vision of society or politics along these lines and really exist for "finding the truth and figuring out what's best for the country" (Ahmad 2008: 541). Some observers believe that "we are heading into the golden age of think tanks in America" (Hamre 2008: 2). A stroll through their websites quickly reveals that references to the "public interest" are abundant and think tanks oftentimes pay lip service to the "common good". They may, how-ever, be farther than ever from serving it in earnest - by not living up to their potential of complicating oversimplified policy debates or constructively simplifying complexity.

The proliferation of think tanks with broadly conservative organizational stances has been a conspicuous evolutionary outcome. They both mirror and actively propel a system of thought that often fuses a principled "libertarian" preference for liberty over economic equality with a decidedly pro-business or anti-union culture and pronounced social conservatism, often lacking empathy for society's underprivileged (cf. Chomsky 2002: 200, Farmer 2006: 20-21). As Rich points out, the notion of "wars of ideas" could be more

accurately coined as a "war of ideologies" in the U.S. context (2004: 3). D.C. think tanks provide the organizational infrastructure and verbal canon fodder for policy battles, more preoccupied with politico-ideological principles than grounded on issues.

Liberals frequently worry that conservatives are winning this ideological war (cf. 2004: 2, 2006: 1). Yet there is no automatism that conservative think tanks' higher *numbers* necessarily translate into actual policy influence, which is tricky to measure (cf. 2001b, Hird 2005, Weidenbaum 2010). They might have most influence in agenda-setting phases of policy cycles when repetition or the "gradual encroachment of ideas" can shape ways that "problems" are defined (Keynes 1936: 383, see Kingdon 1995, Rochefort/Cobb 1994). But: if sound bites replace sound analysis in the final stages, conservative or liberal think tanks' views can cancel each other out (cf. Rich 2004: 28).

Why should policymakers still listen to think tanks? What is their added value for U.S. citizens? With ideological think tanks' decisive departure from organizational objectivity, the credibility of the craft - think tanks' crucial cultural capital - is at stake. There is almost no public accountability (or oversight) of the sector whatsoever. Still, most ideological think tanks are able to grant their sympathetic or self-interested sponsors full tax deductibility of contributions under the IRS tax code section 501(c)(3). As has been explained, deductions are effectively subsidized by American tax payers. While those think tanks may be free from "corruption by the profit motive", U.S. citizens are left in the dark as to who they subsidize and whether contributions are indeed "used for public ends", as the law unmistakably mandates (DiMaggio/Anheier 1990: 137, cf. Harvard Law Review 2002: 1517, see IRS 2010b). Enforcement of the law is erratic at best. The IRS Tax Exempt and Government Entities Division is responsible for overseeing all of the country's hundreds of thousands of nonprofits, but is seriously underfunded and understaffed (cf. Berry 2007: 239). It artificially considers "educating" legislators as something distinct from "lobbying" - a "useful fiction" for think tanks in reality "educate legislators so as to influence them; and to influence is to lobby" (Berry 2007: 239, cf. Harvard Law Review 2002: 1508). Two points are readily apparent:

- Increasing the Division's budget and human resources could improve oversight.
- A public disclosure requirement of making transparent contributors' names without unnecessary reporting burdens offers a way for citizens to evaluate the forces that influence their government (cf. Harvard Law Review 2002: 1515).

While D.C. think tanks effectively became "part of the privatization of the American public policy process" and now seek to shape policies that potentially affect the lives of millions of Americans, citizens as stakeholders are often neglected (Rich 2004: 97). The "public realm is an 'audience' to which policy analysis is transmitted downwards - as a subject to be educated and wherein to raise awareness - rather than the public being treated as a source of ideas and knowledge" (Stone 2007: 268). Feedback loops to society and organizational objectivity could become more important for think tanks' cultural capital in the medium- to long term. The more think tanks throw organizational objectivity overboard, largely doing as they please, the higher "reputation and credibility pressures" will become (Palmer et al. 2009: 57, cf. Ricci 1993: 163, Struyk 2006: 49). Concerned think tank leaders could proactively self-regulate by working towards a "Think Tank Code of Conduct" akin to the last decades' private sector Social Responsibility Movement to impede further erosion of trustworthiness, which is and arguably will be think tanks' prime asset for the foreseeable future (cf. McGann 2004: 23).

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