

# Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise

ANDREW RICH

*City College of New York*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Andrew Rich 2004

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2004

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Sabon 10/13 pt.    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Rich, Andrew.

Think tanks, public policy, and the politics of expertise / Andrew Rich.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-83029-X

1. Policy sciences – Research – United States.    2. Policy scientists – United States.  
3. Research institutes – United States.    4. Nonprofit organizations – United States.  
5. Expertise – political aspects – United States.    6. Political planning – United States.  
7. Legislative hearings – United States.    I. Title.

H97.R53 2004

320.06'0973 – dc22            2003065392

ISBN 0 521 83029 X hardback

# Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	page viii
<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 The Political Demography of Think Tanks	i
2 The Evolution of Think Tanks	29
3 Political Credibility	74
4 The Policy Roles of Experts	104
5 Policy Influence: Making Research Matter	152
6 Think Tanks, Experts, and American Politics	204
<i>Appendix A Details on the Characteristics, Perceptions, and Visibility of Think Tanks</i>	221
<i>Appendix B List of In-Depth Interviews</i>	233
<i>Works Cited</i>	239
<i>Index</i>	253

## Tables

1-1a: Nationally Focused Think Tanks by Budget and Research Scope	<i>page</i> 17
1-1b: State and Regionally Focused Think Tanks by Budget and Research Scope	18
1-2: Think Tanks by Ideology, Research Focus, and Resources	23
1-3: Think Tanks by Ideology and Breadth of Research Interests	24
3-1: Brookings and Heritage Influence by Respondent Group	82
3-2: Rank Ordering of Think Tanks by Ratings of Credibility in 1997	84
3-3: Characteristics of Think Tank Sample	90
3-4: Regression Results	93
3-5: Think Tank Congressional Testimony, Organizational Forms by Affiliations of Others Testifying	98
3-6: Think Tank Congressional Testimony, Ideological Clusters by Affiliations of Others Testifying	99
3-7: Think Tank Media Citations, Organizational Forms by Type of Mention	100
3-8: Think Tank Media Citations, Ideological Clusters by Type of Mention	102
5-1: Agenda-setting Research in Health Care Reform	158
5-2: Congressional Testimony in Telecommunications Reform	182

5-3: References to Experts in Floor Debate on Telecommunications Reform	190
5-4: References in <i>Washington Post</i> to Telecommunications Reform	191
5-5: References to Experts in Floor Debate on the Tax Cut	197
A-1: State and Nationally Focused Think Tanks by Budget Size	224
A-2: Fifteen Largest Think Tanks Grouped by Ideological Cluster	224
A-3: Ten Largest Think Tanks in Each Ideological Cluster	226
A-4: Think Tank Influence Scores in 1997	230
A-5: Top Four Think Tanks Rated for Influence in 1997 by Respondent Group	231

## Figures

1-1: Pattern by which think tanks existing in the 1990s formed	<i>page</i> 15
1-2a: Proliferation pattern of nationally focused think tanks existing in 1990s, by ideology	21
1-2b: Proliferation pattern of state and regionally focused think tanks existing in 1990s, by ideology	21
3-1: Most effective think tank at being influential by respondent group	78
3-2a: Think tanks assessed as most influential in 1997	81
3-2b: Think tanks assessed as most influential in 1993	81
3-3: 1997 ideology scores for think tanks from congressional staff and journalists	85
5-1: Forms of expertise in policy making	154
A-1: Proliferation pattern of think tanks existing in 1990s	223

## The Political Demography of Think Tanks

The men of [the] Brookings [Institution] did it by analysis, by painstaking research, by objective writing, by an imagination that questioned the “going” way of doing things, and then they proposed alternatives. . . . After 50 years of telling the Government what to do, you are more than a private institution. . . . You are a national institution, so important . . . that if you did not exist we would have to ask someone to create you.

President Lyndon B. Johnson  
September 29, 1966<sup>1</sup>

[The Heritage Foundation] is without question the most far-reaching conservative organization in the country in the war of ideas, and one which has had a tremendous impact not just in Washington, but literally across the planet.

Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich  
November 15, 1994<sup>2</sup>

These tributes by a president and a speaker of the House more than twenty-eight years apart are high praise for two organizations that are both commonly known as think tanks. Yet, in their praise, Johnson and Gingrich characterize the accomplishments of these organizations in notably different terms: Brookings for its “painstaking research” and “objective writing,” Heritage for its “far-reaching” efforts in the “war of ideas.” These characterizations evoke two quite different images and suggest quite different understandings of the role of think tanks in American

<sup>1</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966, Book II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 1096–7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Heritage Foundation 1994 Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1995), p. 2.

politics. The first emphasizes their role as producers of credible expertise; the second highlights their contributions to polemical debates over ideas.

The differences signaled by these tributes provoke the central questions for this book: Have think tanks generally evolved from producing painstaking research and objective writing to pursuing ideological agendas with far-reaching impact in the war of ideas? If so, what accounts for these transformations, and what are their consequences for the role and influence of their products – expertise and ideas – in American policy making?

Experts have typically been thought of as neutral, credible, and above the fray of the rough and tumble of policy making. Progressive reformers early in the twentieth century turned to the burgeoning social sciences for salvation. Reformers believed that the new ranks of policy experts trained at universities would be capable of usurping patronage politics; experts would develop *real* solutions to the social and economic instabilities that stemmed from the Industrial Revolution. American politics and American society would be better informed and much improved thanks to their efforts.

While full confidence in expertise waned in the decades that followed, the training of new policy experts became an obsession of reformers through much of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The obsession was reflected in the formation and expansion of social science departments and policy schools at universities across the country. It was reflected as well in the founding of scores of independent think tanks, organizations intended to produce policy-relevant research for Washington decision makers.

These developments were observed by twentieth-century scholars of the policymaking process and contribute to what remains the prevailing understanding of experts in American policy making, as important background voices that bring rational, reasoned analysis to long-term policy discourse based on the best evidence available. From Charles Merriam to Harold Lasswell to John Kingdon, political scientists have portrayed research as principally affecting a “general climate of ideas which, in turn, affects policymakers’ thinking in the long run.”<sup>3</sup> Technical research can inform particular policy provisions; consistent findings from many

<sup>3</sup> John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies, Second Edition* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995), p. 59. See also Charles E. Merriam, *New Aspects of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Harold D. Lasswell, “The Policy Orientation,” *The Policy Sciences*, ed. by Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1951).



studies over time can effectively transform ways of thinking about policy issues.<sup>4</sup> Scholars quarrel over whether policy research is most helpful in offering specific prescriptions for public problems or, as is more commonly suggested, as general enlightenment on public issues.<sup>5</sup> But by most all appraisals, more experts are good for policy making. For much of the twentieth century, this judgment was accurate; experts fulfilled these mandates. Even if their work was sometimes used by others for quite political purposes, experts remained ostensibly neutral and detached. Experts offered ideas and policy prescriptions that were rigorously crafted, rational, and, in the long run, helpful to the work of decision makers.

Contrary to these earlier experiences and scholarly understandings, however, by the end of the twentieth century, the ranks of real-life policy experts scarcely conformed to the promise of making policy choices clearer and more rigorous and decisions necessarily more rational. In 2002, as members of Congress considered reauthorization of the welfare reforms first enacted in 1996, there was little agreement among the experts outside of government recommending changes to the 1996 law. Experts produced studies advocating everything from expansions in child care subsidies and low-income housing vouchers to provisions that promote marriage and sexual abstinence.<sup>6</sup>

Along with little agreement among them on how to revise the law, there was also little restraint among experts in expressing their views. Far from reservedly offering detached analysis to affect policy decisions in the long

<sup>4</sup> See Carol Weiss, "Research for Policy's Sake: The Enlightenment Function of Social Research," *Policy Analysis* 3 (1977): 531–45; Charles E. Lindblom and David Cohen, *Usable Knowledge* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979); and David A. Rochefort and Roger W. Cobb, *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> For the first view, see James S. Coleman, *Policy Research in the Social Sciences* (Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1972). For the latter view, see Carol Weiss, "Research for Policy's Sake: The Enlightenment Function of Social Research"; and Charles E. Lindblom and David Cohen, *Usable Knowledge*.

<sup>6</sup> See, respectively, Gina Adams, Kathleen Snyder, and Jodi R. Sandfort, "Navigating the Child Care Subsidy System: Policies and Practices that Affect Access and Retention," Project Report, Urban Institute's Assessing the New Federalism Project, April 2002; Barbara Sard and Margy Waller, "Housing Strategies to Strengthen Welfare Policy and Support Working Families," Policy Brief, The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 2002; Patrick Fagan, "Marriage: Next Step for Welfare Reform," press release, The Heritage Foundation, 11 April 2002; Robert Rector, "The Effectiveness of Abstinence Education Programs in Reducing Sexual Activity Among Youth," Heritage Background, The Heritage Foundation, 8 April 2002.

run, many of those who fashioned themselves experts were clamoring to make frequent, loud, aggressive contributions to the immediate public debates over welfare reform. They held press conferences and forums, offered congressional testimony, and sponsored dueling policy briefs. Much of this work emanated from experts and analysts based at think tanks, the numbers of which quadrupled from fewer than 70 to more than 300 between 1970 and the turn of the century.

One typical exchange during this debate was over the effects of welfare on marriage rates. Analysts at the Heritage Foundation, Brookings Institution, Progressive Policy Institute, and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities each produced studies on the subject.<sup>7</sup> In fact, between fall 2001 and spring 2002, each promoted an assortment of reports, policy briefs, and press releases on the topic, followed by public briefings, conferences, and press events, all in anticipation of Congress's reauthorization of the legislation, due by fall 2002. And this think tank work was noted; scholars from the Heritage Foundation, Brookings Institution, Progressive Policy Institute, and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities obtained media visibility for this work that greatly exceeded that for the work of counterparts on the issue based at universities.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of these conflicting, highly visible expert voices illustrates the great distance between historical and scholarly understandings of experts and the ways in which they are most visible and active today. The example points as well to the central role of think tanks in producing research in contemporary policy debates. Many of the most visible expert voices today emanate from public policy think tanks. These think tanks have contributed to a transformation in the role of experts in American policy making. Many experts now behave like advocates. They are not just visible but highly contentious as well. They more actively market their work than conventional views of experts would suggest; their work, in

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Robert Rector, "Using Welfare Reform to Strengthen Marriage," *American Experiment Quarterly*, Summer 2001; Isabel Sawhill, "What Can Be Done to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Out-of-Wedlock Births?," *Brookings Policy Brief*, October 2001; Daniel T. Lichter, "Marriage as Public Policy," *PPI Policy Report*, 10 September 2001; Shawn Fremstad and Wendell Primus, "Strengthening Families: Ideas for TANF Reauthorization," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 22 January 2002.

<sup>8</sup> As one crude indication of the substantial activity among think tanks, these four think tanks received six times more references in relation to welfare reform (twelve) in the *Washington Post* than Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin (two), all universities with well-known welfare policy scholars, combined between January 1 and April 30, 2002.

turn, often represents pre-formed points of view rather than even attempts at neutral, rational analysis.

This book examines these developments and their consequences for American policy making. In his analysis of the attributes and roles of experts, Kingdon clearly differentiates the “policy community” from the “political people.” Policy experts are part of the former. In his revised edition of *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, he remains committed to the view that politicians and experts operate in mutually exclusive spheres. He observes:

As to the policy and political streams, I still find it useful to portray them as independent of one another, but then sometimes joined. . . . The policy community concentrates on matters like technical detail, cost-benefit analyses, gathering data, conducting studies, and honing proposals. The political people, by contrast, paint with a broad brush, are involved in many more issue areas than the policy people are, and concentrate on winning elections, promoting parties, and mobilizing support in the larger polity.<sup>9</sup>

Kingdon maintains that researchers and research organizations are generally peripheral to the hard-fought endgames of policy making. Their research is brought to bear by others, including elected officials, interest group leaders, and journalists, who are among the “political people.”

Like Kingdon, scholars in the first half of the twentieth century believed that social scientists were equipped to improve the quality of political debate by providing methodologically rigorous, defensible (if not irrefutable) prescriptions for solving policy problems and that they could and should do so while remaining detached, without becoming mired in the messy and divisive political process.<sup>10</sup> A similar basic view persisted after World War II. In a volume about the *Policy Sciences*, published in 1951, Easton Rothwell predicted:

The policy sciences can serve the need for clarification. They offer rapidly developing techniques for making assumptions explicit and for testing their validity in terms of both the basic values which policy seeks to realize and the actualities of human relations to which policy must be applied. By the method of converting general principles into specific indices of action, the policy sciences provide

<sup>9</sup> Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies, Second Edition*, p. 228.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Merriam was one of the leaders of this movement as organizer of the Social Science Research Council in the 1920s. He saw his effort as aimed at suggesting “certain possibilities of approach to a method, in the hope that others may take up the task and through reflection and experiment eventually introduce more intelligent and scientific technique into the study and practices of government, and into popular attitudes toward the governing process.” Merriam, *New Aspects of Politics*, p. xiii.

criteria by which to test the applicability of general principles in specific situations. They also equip the policy-maker with a sufficiently sharp image of the full implications of given postulates to enable him to avoid conflicts of principle within the program of action.<sup>11</sup>

Such optimism was echoed by Harold Lasswell, who added the caveat that “the policy approach is not to be confounded with the superficial idea that social scientists ought to desert science and engage full time in practical politics. Nor should it be confused with the suggestion that social scientists ought to spend most of their time advising policy-makers on immediate questions.”<sup>12</sup> Through much of the twentieth century, it was viewed as neither desirable that experts should be nor realistic that they could be influential by engaging directly with policy makers in active political debates.

Yet it is a central determination of this book that many contemporary policy experts do seek an active and direct role in ongoing political debates. Far from maintaining a detached neutrality, policy experts are frequently aggressive advocates for ideas and ideologies; they even become brokers of political compromise. Many of these most aggressive experts are based at think tanks; think tanks have become an infrastructure and an engine for their efforts.

### The Study of Think Tanks

I attribute substantial importance to a type of organization that has received little scholarly attention. Fewer than a dozen books published since 1970 focus on American think tanks.<sup>13</sup> No articles specifically about think tanks have appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, or the *Journal of Politics* in the past thirty years, nor in the major policy or sociology journals. By contrast, scores of books

<sup>11</sup> C. Easton Rothwell, “Foreword,” *The Policy Sciences*, ed. by Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1951), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> Lasswell, “The Policy Orientation,” *The Policy Sciences*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Only five of these are written by political scientists. David M. Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); James G. McGann, *The Competition for Dollars, Scholars, and Influence in the Public Policy Research Industry* (New York: University Press of America, 1995); Donald E. Abelson, *American Think Tanks and their Role in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996); Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 1996); Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

and articles have been published about other types of nongovernmental organizations, particularly interest groups.<sup>14</sup>

One reason why think tanks historically have been granted little attention by social scientists relates to the traditional characteristics of think tanks; another relates to the biases of social scientists, especially political scientists. On the one hand, until the 1960s, American think tanks were generally low-profile actors in the policymaking process. Think tank scholars developed important and frequently used research and ideas for policy makers to assimilate, but these scholars rarely debated them publicly or in highly visible ways either with one another or with other influential actors in the political process.<sup>15</sup> As Kent Weaver recalls, Brookings scholars had a running joke that their “books [we]re written for policy-makers and read by college students.”<sup>16</sup> Think tank research was generally not intended to grab headlines but rather to become infused into the political lexicon over time. This low profile has contributed to their attracting little scholarly attention.

The lack of attention to think tanks also reflects the outlook of the scholars who might be most likely to study them. Political scientists have

<sup>14</sup> Beginning with Bentley, Truman, and Dahl (and confounded by the work of Olson), an extensive interest group literature has evolved through the past half century and continues among rational choice and behavioral scholars in political science and sociology. Think tanks rarely, if ever, receive even a mention in this work, and the force of ideas and expertise receives inadequate attention. For a careful review of the interest group literature, see Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech, *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that they did not play important advisory roles in policy making and for policy makers. See, for example, James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), Chapters 4–6, for a discussion of the role of institutions like the Brookings Institution, the RAND Corporation, and the Committee for Economic Development with presidents, executive branch agencies, and business lobbyists, respectively, through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. And, to be sure, in earlier decades, think tanks were at times visibly credited for important outcomes. A prominent example in the not-too-distant past is the Brookings Institution’s influence in the establishment of the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) in 1973. After designing and shepherding the new government agency into existence, one of Brookings’ principal economists, Alice Rivlin, became the CBO’s first director. See James A. Smith, *Brookings at Seventy-Five* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991), pp. 82–6.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in R. Kent Weaver, “The Changing World of Think Tanks,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22 (1989): 563–78. Weaver talks about this quality in relation to what he labels “university without student” think tanks, which include most of the oldest institutions like Brookings and the American Enterprise Institute, and, writing in 1989, Weaver talks of this quality in the present tense. I discuss Weaver’s categories in more detail in Chapter 2.

long had difficulty accounting for the role of ideas and expertise in American politics, the principal products of think tanks. As Peter Hall observes:

Ideas are generally acknowledged to have an influence over policymaking. . . . But that role is not easily described. Any attempt to specify the conditions under which ideas acquire political influence inevitably teeters on the brink of reductionism, while the failure to make such an attempt leaves a large lacuna at the center of our understanding of public policy.<sup>17</sup>

A generation of political science scholarship has largely neglected this “lacuna,” treating interests, often tied to economically rational calculations, as the principal and overriding source of power in American policy making. In these characterizations, ideas and expertise represent strategic currency in the defense of interests but not substantively important and independent forces.<sup>18</sup>

This limited view of the role of expertise may have been more justifiable in an era when the underlying “rules of the game” were basically agreed by scholars to consist of a “consensus” in support of expanding social welfare commitments on the domestic front. Through the 1960s and 1970s, competing interests may have been legitimately more central to

<sup>17</sup> Peter A. Hall, *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism across Nations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 4. Commenting in a similar vein on this problem, Peter Schuck points out,

There are pitfalls in emphasizing the causal role of ideas in politics. Compared with votes, institutions, interests, events, and other palpable phenomena that political analysts can observe and even measure, ideas are elusive and their effects on outcomes are hard to gauge. Ideas may simultaneously alter what political actors perceive and what they pursue. At the same time, actors may deploy ideas rhetorically and instrumentally. Thus, ideas’ independent causal force in politics must be revealed through inference and the testimony of those most intimately involved. We are wise to be skeptical of such evidence, but we would be foolish to ignore it simply because it is less tangible and quantifiable.

Peter H. Schuck, “The Politics of Rapid Legal Change: Immigration Policy in the 1980s,” *The New Politics of Public Policy*, ed. by Marc K. Landy and Martin A. Levin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> See Aaron Wildavsky and Ellen Tenenbaum, *The Politics of Mistrust* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981), and Peter Schuck, “The Politics of Rapid Legal Change,” pp. 50–1. In relation to the scholarship of positive political theorists, for example, Schuck observes,

The political role of ideas has not gone unnoticed by positive political theorists. Their theories, however, tend to view ideas as epiphenomenal rather than causal, instrumental rather than normative. These theories note that innovative politicians use agendas, voting, and issues strategically and that these resources may include new ideas. But ideas in this view are little more than additional tools in the politician’s kit bag. From the theorist’s perspective, ideas may be even *less* than this – if they obscure the “real” interests that lie beneath them.

the policymaking process than contending ideas of the appropriate role and scope of government.<sup>19</sup> When the underlying tenets of Keynesian economics were basically shared by Republicans and Democrats alike, for example, visible battles were often restricted to competing interests' claims to public privileges and resources.<sup>20</sup>

Through this period a diverse literature emerged about the attributes and influence of visible and aggressive interest-based organizations.<sup>21</sup> Many scholars illuminated the efforts and underlying biases associated with interest group politics and the people who participate in the organization of these groups.<sup>22</sup> This empirical scholarship, however, pays little attention to ideas, expertise, or ideological cleavages, and it virtually ignores the efforts of think tanks and experts generally in the political and policymaking processes.

<sup>19</sup> Lowi characterizes this period as one of "interest group liberalism." This predicament led him to complain, "The decline of a meaningful dialogue between a liberalism and a conservatism has meant the decline of a meaningful adversary political proceedings in favor of administrative, technical, and logrolling politics. . . . The emerging public philosophy, interest-group liberalism, has sought to solve the problems of public authority in a large modern state by defining them away. . . . Interest-group liberalism seeks to justify power by avoiding law and by parceling out to private parties the power to make public policy." Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 43–4.

<sup>20</sup> These battles were often intense; for if there was an underlying "expansionist consensus," there was also great controversy over the substance of this expansion, especially on non-economic issues like civil rights and foreign policy.

<sup>21</sup> At least since Truman's *The Governmental Process*, interests and interest groups have guided pluralist inquires and understandings of the political process. David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Knopf, 1951). Olson complicated understandings of the role of economic self-interest and rationality in group politics in *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965). The result has been an enhanced and enlarged debate over the role of interests and interest groups in the political and policymaking process. For all of the contention that has surrounded these scholarly debates, few have sought to raise the profile or importance of ideas and expertise. Rather, debates have revolved around the precise role of interests and interest groups in politics and the factors that account for their foundation and growth in the face of counter-incentives to act self-interestedly.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Terry M. Moe, *The Organization of Interests* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Robert H. Salisbury, "Interest Representation: The Dominance of Institutions," *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984): 64–76; Jack L. Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). These four are exemplars of a broader literature. Rational choice scholars have also taken to writing about interest groups, particularly the factors that account for interest group membership and participation. This work also generally does not account for think tanks. See, for example, Dennis Chong, *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Interestingly, while the political environment by many accounts began to favor the preferences of conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s, interest group scholars focused particular energy on understanding the proliferation of mostly liberal public interest and citizen groups. Since Berry's assessment of the proliferation and influence of mostly liberal-minded public interest groups, scholars have followed his example with extensive analysis of the origins, membership, and influence of these organizations.<sup>23</sup> While an important area of study, public interest group scholarship and the interest group literature more generally are of little help in coming to terms with the relationship of organizational politics with the ascendance of conservative principles and ideologies in American politics. By contrast, a focus on think tanks helps to draw links between organized group efforts and developments in the broader political environment.<sup>24</sup>

As the number of think tanks has grown in recent decades, well more than half of those that have emerged have represented identifiable ideological proclivities in their missions and research. The overwhelming majority of these ideological think tanks have been broadly conservative, producing work that favors limited government, free enterprise, and personal freedom. So as contending ideas and ideologies have risen in profile as the principal fodder of political and policy debates, and as think tanks have themselves become more often ideological – frequently conservative – and aggressively promotional, think tanks and their products have come to warrant greater attention. An appreciation of think tanks is helpful not just for understanding the political role of expertise and ideas in American policy making but for accounting for how ideology informs policy making.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See Jeffrey M. Berry, *Lobbying for the People* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). More recent work includes Anthony J. Nownes and Grant Neeley, "Public Interest Group Entrepreneurship and Theories of Group Mobilization," *Political Research Quarterly* 49 (1996): 119–46; Anthony J. Nownes, "Public Interest Groups and the Road to Survival," *Polity* 27 (1995): 379–404. For a review of this work and the interest group literature generally, see Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech, *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and in Political Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> For a different view on these developments that points out the areas of progress and potential for liberals, see Jeffrey M. Berry, *The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps reflecting their warrant for more attention, think tanks have recently begun to appear in scholarly accounts of interest group politics. For example, think tanks make their first substantial appearance in Berry's work in his third edition of *The Interest Group Society*. Jeffrey M. Berry, *The Interest Group Society, Third Edition* (New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 126–8. See also Andrew Rich and R. Kent Weaver, "Advocates and Analysts:



## What Defines Think Tanks?

Considerable disagreement exists over the organizations to which the label “think tank” refers. In some accounts, they are undifferentiated from government research organizations such as the General Accounting Office and the Congressional Research Service.<sup>26</sup> They are occasionally equated with university-affiliated research centers and institutes.<sup>27</sup> In some instances, research organizations based at interest groups, such as the AARP’s Policy Institute, are referred to as think tanks.<sup>28</sup> I view none of the aforementioned as think tanks.

I define 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 policymaking process*. Operationally, think tanks are 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations that conduct and disseminate research and ideas on public policy issues. Politically, think tanks are aggressive institutions that actively seek to maximize public credibility and political access to make their expertise and ideas influential in policy making.

In truth, drawing irrefutable distinctions between think tanks and other types of organizations is neither entirely possible nor desirable; rather, institutional boundaries are frequently amorphous and overlapping. Nonetheless, the products and objectives of think tanks are central to any clarification of how think tanks might be differentiated from other actors in their operations and influence.

Think Tanks and the Politicization of Expertise,” *Interest Group Politics, Fifth Edition*, ed. by Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1998); Mark A. Smith, *American Business and Political Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 167–96. For a discussion of the policy role of think tanks in the 1970s and 1980s, see also Martha Derthick and Paul J. Quirk, *The Politics of Deregulation* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> William H. Robinson, “The Congressional Research Service: Policy Consultant, Think Tank, and Information Factory,” *Organizations for Policy Analysis: Helping Government Think*, ed. by Carol H. Weiss (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Nelson Polsby, “Tanks but No Tanks,” *Public Opinion*, April/May 1983, pp. 14–16.

<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Evans Kitfield, *The Capitol Source* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal, 1995); Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*. In characterizations of their functions, the principal role of think tanks in American politics has been variously described as producing policy alternatives (Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*), supporting party politics (Winard Gellner, “The Politics of Policy ‘Political Think Tanks’ and Their Markets in the U.S. Institutional Environment,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Summer 1995), defining “the boundaries of our policy debates” (Smith, *The Idea Brokers*, p. xiii), and appearing at too many different points in the political and policy processes to highlight any one (Polsby, “Tanks but No Tanks”).

Think tanks care about maximizing their credibility because, compared with interest groups, think tanks rarely have an explicit and specifically identifiable constituency whom they represent in the eyes of policy makers. Think tanks cannot rely on the size or strength of a voting constituency to carry weight and influence with policy makers. While the AARP might produce research in efforts to affect policymaking decisions, millions of older Americans provide their central and strongest organizational leverage for influencing policy. By contrast, think tanks, even ones that seek to speak for and that benefit from the support of those who share an underlying ideology, are ultimately and fundamentally subject to the credibility and believability of their research products – and vulnerable to attacks on them.

In order to achieve credibility, think tanks seek to maximize their independence. The seriousness with which think tank research is taken depends on its being viewed as independent of specific financial interests. As subsequent chapters illustrate, many think tanks, even those that actively promote research aligned with particular ideologies or points of view, seek to portray an independence from narrow groups of supporters.

Think tanks also pursue political access. Think tanks may aim to inform and affect quite different audiences by their research; but, particularly in recent years, think tanks rarely issue reports and passively move on to their next study. Think tanks seek to gain notice for their research among relevant decision makers and seek access to them in order to influence political outcomes. Whether writing op-eds about the importance of marriage in relation to welfare reauthorization or attracting opportunities to testify before Congress on environmental regulation, most think tanks make establishing access an explicit part of their missions.<sup>29</sup> Their efforts to develop access have consequences for their influence; and, in recent years, these efforts have affected perceptions of the role and effectiveness of experts in policy making generally.

<sup>29</sup> The political access of think tanks tends to far surpass that of university-based research institutes, and the incentives to pursue political access are far greater for think tank researchers than university faculty. University-based social scientists often have professional, if not personal, incentives to move quickly from one study to the next and to conduct research relevant to scholarly and theoretically based debates rather than that which confronts the most current and pressing policy questions of the day. Academic journals and university presses, the traditional publication outlets for academics seeking professional rewards, are typically more concerned with advancing disciplinary debates than addressing debates on Capitol Hill.

## Think Tanks in a Period of Growth

The origins of the term “think tank” are ambiguous, with most reports suggesting that the label arose during World War II in reference to military research and development organizations.<sup>30</sup> With little consensus in recent decades about what organizations can or should claim the label “think tank,” some think tank leaders are actually reluctant to have their organizations categorized as think tanks and nervous, once classified, about what other organizations might be considered among their ranks.<sup>31</sup> Offsetting the apprehensions of some organizations are the eager efforts of some interest groups to win the label “think tank,” for whatever added credibility and stature it might bring their efforts.

A result of this jockeying to win or avoid the label is that determining the number of think tanks operating in American politics at any particular moment is difficult. While other types of organizations, like universities and trade associations, may undergo processes of accreditation or may have clear and consistent prestige or survival incentives associated with self-identification as particular types of organizations, think tanks, as I have defined them, may be as apt to reject the label “think tank” as to accept it.

My estimate of the number of think tanks operating in American politics is based on an examination of references from directories, books, and scholarly articles about think tanks as well as newspaper and magazine clippings. The single most comprehensive source of think tank listings, and the one upon which I depend most, is Hellebust’s *Think Tank Directory*.<sup>32</sup> The 1996 directory records entries for 1,212 independent and university-affiliated “think tank–like organizations,” organizations that were assessed to be “nonprofit public policy research organization[s],

<sup>30</sup> See James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. xiii–xiv. See also Paul Dickson, *Think Tanks* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), pp. 21–34, for a slightly different but not inconsistent explanation of the origins of the term.

<sup>31</sup> As Dickson put it as long ago as 1971, “[M]ost groups that are think tanks don’t like the term, while, in contrast, pretentious little research groups often invoke the term to look important.” Dickson, *Think Tanks*, 1971, p. 27. Diane Stone points out that some think tanks explicitly reject the label “think tank” while others create alternative labels for themselves. “The Aspen Institute denies in all its promotional material that it is a think tank, while Will Marshall of the Democrat-affiliated Progressive Policy Institute refers to his [organization as an] ‘analytic guerrilla group.’” Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Lynn Hellebust, ed., *Think Tank Directory: A Guide to Nonprofit Public Policy Research Organizations* (Topeka, Kans.: Government Research Service, 1996).

either independent or associated with a college or university, and located in the United States.”<sup>33</sup>

In sorting through Hellebust’s entries, I excluded from my count organizations that are not independent or not oriented toward affecting public policy debates, and I added to my count several organizations referenced elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> References from all of the sources consulted combine to create a record of 306 independent, public policy-oriented think tanks operating in American politics in 1996. While *The Think Tank Directory* is now somewhat dated, the status, existence, and qualifications of these think

<sup>33</sup> Hellebust points out, “Not included in the directory are research-oriented government agencies, profit-making research entities, institutes for the development of new technology, and short-term research projects.” Hellebust, *The Think Tank Directory*, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> I left out all 625 university-affiliated research organizations listed by Hellebust. In addition, I excluded another 253 organizations with characteristics similar to those of the Academy for State and Local Government, which functions as a “policy and research center for its Trustee organizations,” and the American Family Foundation, which is a “secular nonprofit tax-exempt research center and educational organization” whose purpose is “to study psychological manipulation and high-control and cultic groups.” The former organization is closely tied to and run by government officials and thus not sufficiently independent for my purposes. The latter organization, while performing independent research, is oriented toward public education and counseling rather than toward effecting public policy change.

I am left with 302 institutions that qualify as think tanks according to my definition. An additional four think tanks were added to the count based on references made in a variety of other sources. The four organizations added were Campaign for America’s Future, a liberal/progressive think tank founded in 1996; Institute for Energy Research, a conservative, Texas-based think tank founded in 1989; Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies, a scholarly, liberal-oriented research organization started in 1994; and the German Marshall Fund, a research and grantmaking institution founded in 1972. The first three may have been overlooked by Hellebust because they are new and relatively small. The German Marshall Fund may have been considered a foundation rather than a think tank by Hellebust. Whatever the case, the German Marshall Fund qualifies as a think tank by my definition.

The fact that I added only four additional organizations is actually a testament to the comprehensiveness of Hellebust’s directory. The other sources consulted include Robert L. Hollings, *Nonprofit Public Policy Research Organizations: A Sourcebook on Think Tanks in Government* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1993); Eleanor Evans Kitfield, *The Capitol Source* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal, 1995); James G. McGann, *The Competition for Dollars, Scholars and Influence in the Public Policy Research Industry* (New York: University Press of America, 1995); Joseph G. Peschek, *Policy-Planning Organizations: Elite Agendas and America’s Rightward Turn* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Smith, *The Idea Brokers*, 1991; Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, 1996; Donald E. Abelson, “From Policy Research to Political Advocacy: The Changing Role of Think Tanks in American Politics,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 25 (1996): 93–126; and Laura Brown Chisolm, “Sinking the Think Tanks Upstream: The Use and Misuse of Tax Exemption Law to Address the Use and Misuse of Tax-exempt Organizations by Politicians,” *University of Pittsburgh Law Review*, 1990.