

Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes

Donald E. Abelson

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According to a recent estimate, there are more than 3,000 public-policy institutes—or “think tanks”—around the globe. Yet the literature on these organizations is relatively sparse. One reason, perhaps, is the youth of most think tanks. In 1970, for instance, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Brookings Institution, and the Hoover Institution were doing important work. But the second and third generations of American think tanks—for instance, the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute, the Progressive Policy Institute, and countless state-based groups—have been formed in just the past few decades. One would expect, then, a lag in scholarship. After all, one can't write about the think tank “phenomenon” until that phenomenon has actually taken place.

In *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, Donald Abelson, a political scientist at the University of Western Ontario, attempts to measure the influence of American and Canadian think tanks. This is a more difficult undertaking than it might sound. Indeed, in his 1993 book *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks*, David Ricci deemed such a project nearly impossible: “When institutes like Brookings and AEI promote ideas, they can never be sure what effect those intangible entities will have on other Washingtonians, no matter how suggestible. While investigating the subject, I looked closely at what think tanks are doing, from books to seminars to briefings to breakfast meetings. I also asked fellows and managers to tell me what results they thought their activities would produce. The more I saw and heard, the more I understood that no one can know precisely what is happening in this drama.” Ultimately, Abelson comes to much the same conclusion. While that may be depressing to scholars interested in the topic—and to Abelson himself—this book still yields many interesting observations about the nature of think tanks and the policymaking process more generally.

Abelson attempts to distinguish his own conceptual framework from

two classic theories of how political power is wielded: elite theory and pluralist theory. Elite theory, advanced by William Domhoff, Thomas Dye, and others, posits that the political system is dominated by a select group of individuals and organizations with common goals. Usually, elite theorists consider those goals to include the maintenance of capitalism tempered by a moderate level of government regulation and an intermittently interventionist foreign policy, driven not by principle but self-interest. Elite theory “allows scholars to identify the close ties between those who fund think tanks and the individuals who operate them,” Abelson writes. But it is based on the faulty assumption “that with the right connections think tanks can and will be able to influence public policy.” How this is achieved is not adequately explained by elite theory, Abelson argues.

Pluralist theory, which is perhaps most closely identified with the work of David Truman and Robert Dahl, comes closer to the mark, according to Abelson, but it is still found wanting. Think tanks may indeed compete for influence, alongside trade unions, environmental groups, and other nongovernmental organizations, as pluralist theorists argue. But this fails to take into account think tanks’ privileged status. Think tanks, Abelson argues, “possess unique attributes that allow them to stand out,” among which are “expertise and close ties to policymakers.”

Instead, he calls for an “institutionalist” approach. It holds that “not only do think tanks vary enormously in terms of the resources they have at their disposal, but they assign different priorities to participating at various stages of the policy cycle,” Abelson writes. “This becomes particularly clear in comparing how think tanks function in different political systems. It also becomes important in interpreting data such as media citations and testimony before legislative committees that can be used to evaluate think tank performance.”

Abelson is clearly building on the work of John Kingdon, who has written much about the importance of agenda setting in American politics. According to Kingdon, think tanks may often be unable to influence the final choice made by policymakers, but they can do much to set—and perhaps expand—the limits of respectable debate. This, in turn, leads to the consideration of various alternatives that may not have been on the agenda previously.

Consider, for instance, one of the most popular ways of determining the relative influence of think tanks: the amount of media citations they garner. Many think tanks that advance limited-government views do well on this measure. Does this mean, then, that the state is about to wither? Far from it. The federal government continues to play an extensive role in the economic and social lives of Americans. But it does show that free-market ideas are now on the agenda. Proposals that once seemed radical or even fanciful—such as school vouchers and pension reform—have become viable policy alternatives.

One might take Abelson to task for not considering more fully a third

framework that is often mentioned in the same breath as elite theory and pluralist theory—state theory. It's true that state theory was unfashionable for many years, an idea that seemed applicable only to totalitarian regimes, not Western democratic governments. But in the past 20 years, due largely to the work of Theda Skocpol, state theory has experienced somewhat of a renaissance. The basic argument is that while the public can indeed impose some restraint on the actions of the bureaucracy and elected officials, the state retains a degree of autonomy and works according to its own logic. State theory can help explain the seeming anomalous cases of former think-tank staffers who enter government pledging to work for a certain set of ideas and then enacting policies that are quite different. In some cases, these individuals have been co-opted by the system; in others, they are genuinely doing their best to reach their goal, however slowly or circuitously. But either way, the state itself is an important actor.

Abelson's explanation of why U.S. think tanks seem to be more influential than Canadian think tanks is twofold. First, there are differences in political structures. "With a government based on separate branches sharing power, a party system in which members of Congress are free to vote as they wish, and a growing number of presidential candidates trying to develop new ideas, [American] think tanks have multiple opportunities to shape public opinion and public policy," Abelson writes. Canada's parliamentary system, in contrast, provides fewer such opportunities. Second, and more important, Abelson contends, is that Canadian think tanks have fewer resources—both financial and human—than America's top policy institutes. He says that cultural differences may explain why Canadian philanthropic organizations and corporations are less likely to support public-policy research than are similar groups in the United States. But this argument is vague and not compelling.

As noted earlier, Abelson concludes on a somewhat pessimistic note. He does not really have an answer to the question posed in the title of his book. "We cannot, for instance, conclude that think tanks have influence 20 percent or 50 percent of the time. We cannot even say for certain how much impact specific think tanks have had at particular stages of policy debates or whom exactly they have influenced. At best, by assessing their involvement in specific policy areas, we can obtain a better sense of how relevant or irrelevant they were," Abelson writes. He may know the reader will find this statement unsatisfying and anti-climactic. If so, he is right. But what is even more disappointing is that such a cautious conclusion may be the best that we can expect. Policymaking, as has been noted so often before, is a messy process—one that social scientists have done much to explain but will probably never fully understand.

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¹The views expressed are the author's and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond or the Federal Reserve System.