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Stability In Think Tank Rankings, But Are They An Elitist Bunch?

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Since I began writing these articles about how peers rank market-oriented think tanks, Heritage Foundation has been the consistent leader. *The 2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* was released last week by James G. McGann, leader of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. The release is usually accompanied by a high-level meeting of the heads of the most relevant think tanks. I had the privilege of attending, and the results are as follows.

Heritage was named as a leading think tank in 24 categories. The Brookings Institution was first in the overall ranking, which includes think tanks of different orientations. Without counting its foreign subsidiaries, Brookings received 34 nominations. Heritage was first among all think tanks, including Brookings, as the think tank with most impact on public policy. This is the second year in a row that it earned this coveted position.

Repeating its success from 2018, Canada's Fraser Institute placed second, receiving honors in 23 categories. Their budget is a fraction (15 percent) of that of Heritage, and also two-thirds smaller than that of Cato Institute, which received 21 nominations. Fraser ranked first in Canada and topped all other free-market institutes in the category of domestic health-policy studies, as well as in domestic social policy.

There are more than 8,000 think tanks in the TTCSP database. This year's results measured surveys completed either in full or partially by 3,750 "voters" (not all rank think tanks in all categories). More than 50 categories rank think tanks by region, type (independent or affiliated with governments, corporations, political parties or universities) and focus (health, environment, etc.).

No ranking is perfect, and the manner in which the *Global Go To* ranking is compiled, with votes from thousands of people involved in policy, can lead to inconsistencies and biases. Few voters know, for example, if a think tank is going downhill in its budget, outputs and outcomes, or even if it has closed or is about to close. Thus, when voting, many tend to vote for past accomplishments and record. McGann, the author of the index, reminds us that "the data collection, research, and analysis for this project, as in previous years, were conducted without the benefit of field research, a budget, or staff." I encourage critics to read McGann's lengthy analysis of the index and the most recent think tank trends. He warns that the GGTTI is "but one measure of a think tank's performance and impact, and has been designed for use in conjunction

with other metrics to help identify and evaluate public policy research organizations around the world.”

Think Tank	Country	Mentions 2016	Mentions 2017	Mentions 2018
Heritage Foundation	US	26	25	24
Fraser Institute	Canada	24	24	23
Cato Institute	US	23	22	21
American Enterprise Institute	US	20	20	20
Adam Smith Institute	U.K.	17	17	17
Libertad y Desarrollo	Chile	16	16	17
CIDAC/Mexico Evalua	Mexico	12	12	14
IMANI	Ghana	13	12	12
CEDICE	Venezuela	12	12	12
Unirule	China	12	12	11
Atlas Network	US	11	11	11
Mercatus	US	9	9	9
Israel Center for Social and Economic Progress	Israel	9	9	9
Centro de Estudios Públicos	Chile	9	9	9
Hoover Institution	US	8	8	9
FAES	Spain	8	9	8
Hudson Institute	US	7	7	8
CERES	Uruguay	7	7	8
Institute of Economic Affairs	U.K.	7	7	6
Not Necessarily Free-Market				
Brookings	US	31	37	34
Chatham House	UK	28	24	24
Konrad Adenauer Foundation	Germany	19	19	19
CSIS	US	20	19	17

Table I: Market oriented think tanks ranked by mentions in the 2018 Global Go To Think Tank Report
TABLE BY ALEJANDRO CHAFUEN

The consistency in the rankings, with few big changes (see Table 1), reflects how a large number of policy players see the work of think tanks around the globe. Heritage, Fraser and Cato have been the top three for considerable time. The American Enterprise Institute, under Arthur C. Brooks, continues strong, appearing in 20 categories. Brooks has major concerns about the way the index is done and will soon move to Harvard University. It would be wonderful if he could embark on the elaboration of a competing index and ranking, or one that can complement the GGTTI. As in the case of the index of economic freedom, where Fraser Institute and Heritage Foundation have competed for more than two decades, efforts using different methodologies and weighing different factors should lead to a better final product.

In Table II I include the top market-oriented think tanks in 20 categories. There is no room to analyze all, so I focus on just a few of the changes in the think tanks that received the most votes. One change regards Mexico's Evalúa, which excelled in the measurements. It joined forces with CIDAC, which conducts different types of analysis. Lúis Rubio is the president of the board of Mexico Evalúa-CIDAC and is a founder of both organizations. Edna Jaime, who started her think tank work in CIDAC, is the General Director. In Spain, Fundación FAES completed its second year as an independent think tank; it had been part of the Popular Party in Spain. In Uruguay, CERES, the *Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Económica y Social* will face a challenge in that its leader, noted economist Ernesto Talvi, is running in the country's presidential primaries.

This year's ranking has Acton Institute climbing to the number one spot among market-oriented groups in "Best Conference" category. The Mont Pelerin Society, the group founded by Nobel Laureate F.A. Hayek, had been leading in this category and came second this year.

Few market-oriented think tanks are mentioned in areas such as environment and energy. The Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) have been free-market leaders here. In the energy sector, think tanks that favor a free economy get crowded out by "institutes" that are basically trade associations. The American Petroleum Institute (API), for example, has more than \$200 million in revenues, and in 2016 paid its CEO (latest IRS Form 990) more than \$5 million. API has more than 10 employees earning above \$500,000 per year. No market-oriented institute comes close to being able to compete with them.

Selected Category (World)	Top Ranked Free-Market Think-Tank	Region	Top Ranked Free-Market Think-Tank
Best Conference	Acton Institute	United States	Heritage Foundation
Best Managed	Heritage Foundation	World (Non-US)	Fraser Institute (Canada)
Best New Idea	Heritage Foundation	Central and South America	Centro de Estudios Públicos (Chile)
Best University Based Center	Hoover Institution	Mexico	Mexico Evalúa-CIDAC
Best Use of Social Networks	Heritage Foundation	Western Europe	Adam Smith Institute (U.K.)
Best Use of Internet	Heritage Foundation	South East Asia	Centre for Independent Studies (Australia)
Best Quality Assurance	Mercatus	India, Japan, Korea	Centre for Civil Society (India)
Best Innovative Idea	Heritage Foundation	Middle East	Association for Liberal Thinking (Turkey)
Best Use of Print Media	Heritage Foundation	Sub-Saharan	IMANI (Ghana)
Most Public Policy Impact	Heritage Foundation	Central and Eastern Europe	Lithuanian Free-Market Think Tank

Table II: Heritage Foundation was ranked ahead of other free-market think tanks in several categories
TABLE PRODUCED BY ALEJANDRO CHAFUEN

Beyond the Anglosphere, the two market-oriented think tanks with the most votes are CEDICE Libertad (Venezuela) in 12 categories and Unirule (China) in 11. Including Chinese think tanks in my analysis is becoming more difficult. At the launching of GGTTI, speakers stressed the growing number of Chinese institutes but also the increased pressure and a mandate from Xi Jinping to align themselves with the Communist Party line.

There are many relevant think tanks that do not appear in the index but should. Others, like the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which received many votes and has many scholars sympathetic to a free economy, are harder to qualify as mostly market-oriented. If a leading think tank specifically positions itself as a promoter of a free economy, I would be glad to include it in future rankings.

Are Think Tanks Policy Tools of the Elite?

Last year, James McGann gathered the CEOs of leading U.S. think tanks and presented a survey conducted by an independent firm. 2,000 people were surveyed about how they see the work of think tanks. Only 20 percent answered that think tank work inspired confidence. Over half of the

respondents said they had little idea what think tanks do and so could not answer whether they deserve to be trusted.

Those surveyed were divided into four groups: The Insiders (political and public policy actors), The Activists (party members, those who attend rallies), The Engaged (some political action), and The Spectators (interested in politics). One question asked those surveyed to respond to the statement: “think tanks have the interests of the elite at heart.” 71 percent of the “insiders” agreed that this statement was true. When asked if the work of think tanks inspired confidence, only 28 percent of “spectators” and 35 percent of the “engaged” answered positively. This compares with 64 percent of insiders who trust their work, and 73 percent of insiders who have a positive view of think tanks’ efforts. Independent “spectators” thought differently: only 36 percent thought the work was positive.

Are think tanks and policy “insiders” mostly listening to themselves? The responses on how well think tanks are communicating their views points in that direction—66 percent of insiders agree that think tanks are doing a good job. Only 17 percent of spectators agree. Focus on donors might be the issue here. As long as they communicate well with donors, think tank CEOs seem happy even if spectators disagree and even if they have scant positive outcomes to show.

In order to get out of their bubble, CEOs of some of the leading think tanks have been adopting “diversity” policies. “Diversity” usually means employing people who look different and have different origins and backgrounds, but who think very much alike.

What is next for think tanks? Traditional independent think tanks will be facing growing challenges from: more agile and flexible players, such as bloggers and social media talents; university-based think tanks; and think tanks dominated by government actors, corporate interests or billionaire donor groups. The best think tanks will continue to play important roles in policy advocacy and policymaking as well as in educating their target audience. I expect that we will see a smaller percentage of think tanks continuing to focus on unbiased independent research and long-term education. It will take a new breed of enlightened donors and principled leaders to help these centers of inquiry stay true to their mission and grow into long-term policy powerhouses.