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Cato vs. Koch and the Importance of Nonpartisan, Opinionated Think Tanks

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Think tanks that serve the interests of a particular party won't decrease the power of lobbyists.

In [yesterday's post](#), I discussed the theory of lobbying as a "legislative subsidy" to understaffed members of Congress and discussed a proposal to diffuse the influence of lobbyists by paying congressional staff more. I argued that a major push by conservatives had been to dismantle or discredit independent sources of analysis, such as the Office of Technology Assessment, but that the same effect could be achieved by creating more shared resources.

Another independent resource for information and analysis comes from think tanks, and this connects the debate over lobbying and money to the argument about whether think tanks are becoming "too political," as Tevi Troy of the Hudson Institute asked in an important recent [article](#) in *National Affairs*. That the question had immediate relevance became apparent when Charles and David Koch [filed suit](#) (that is, asked for help from the government) to take control of the libertarian Cato Institute. The dispute itself is confusing and seems to reveal a strange management structure in which Cato was controlled not by its board, like most non-profits, but by a small group of people who called themselves "shareholders." But the Kochs' underlying complaint seems to be that Cato was too independent and was not serving the political interests represented by other groups the Kochs back, such as Americans for Prosperity.

Troy [argued](#) in the *Washington Post* last weekend that “the dispute is tarnishing Cato’s reputation as a place that can provide nonpartisan, if not non-ideological, research.” There’s an important distinction here: Cato obviously has a viewpoint. It is libertarian. But as Troy implicitly accepts, having a viewpoint, or ideology, doesn’t necessarily hurt the credibility of a paper or argument coming from Cato or another think tank. If I read something from Cato, I’m reasonably confident that it will be a solid libertarian argument for a particular position and that the facts in it will be basically accurate, even if I might draw a different conclusion. The distinction between “nonpartisan” and “non-ideological” that Troy draws works well in the case of Cato, because libertarianism exists orthogonally to the current political parties. Making Cato more useful to Republican candidates and causes, as the Kochs seemingly would do, would be a huge shift.

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Having a viewpoint, especially one that is known and public, can be a great strength for a think tank. On the center-left, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, for example, has a general point of view about the importance of the social safety net, and its analyses are considered impeccable. As politics has shifted and become more sharply partisan, they may have fewer Republican friends and probably find themselves critiquing, say, Paul Ryan’s budget proposals more harshly than Democratic ones. But their north star is not the current interests of a political party. As Troy shows (drawing heavily on the work of former Roosevelt Institute president Andrew Rich), think tanks naturally evolved from the technocratic quasi-universities of the Brookings Institution and the Rand Corporation to be more open and explicit about their ideological assumptions. That’s a healthy development, just as it is healthy for the media to abandon the “view from nowhere” and be more open about their assumptions.

But not everyone wants reliable, solid analysis. For the same reasons that the Gingrich Republicans eliminated the OTA, their 2012 counterparts would take down Cato and make it into something more reliably useful to their immediate interests. A think tank that serves the political interests of a party, or the economic interests of its backers, can't help at all in offsetting the legislative subsidy provided by lobbyists. In fact, it increases their monopoly.

You don't have to agree with the Cato Institute to see that there's more at stake here than just the meaning of an old agreement among a bunch of libertarians.

Mark Schmitt is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Fellows Program at the Roosevelt Institute.