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# Think Tanks Are Nonpartisan? Think Again

Once seen as non-ideological “universities without students,” the American think tank has, in many cases, become a partisan stalking horse that devalues the sector’s scholarship.

By [Emily Badger](#)

One of the strangest institutions in Washington — and perhaps the hardest to comprehend from the outside — is the think tank, that quasi-academic, sort-of-political organization that offers, as its primary output, ideas. Universally, think tanks claim to be nonpartisan, and as tax-exempt nonprofits, this is a basic requirement in the tax code. But most people in Washington know the ideological leanings of think tanks that may obscure this fact in their titles: There’s the [Cato Institute](#) (libertarian), the [Heritage Foundation](#) (conservative), the [Brookings Institution](#) (moderate liberal) and the [Center for American Progress](#) (progressive).

And that’s just four of the 400 think tanks that have grown up in town, by Tevi Troy’s count. Troy is a [think tank scholar](#) himself, from the [Hudson Institute](#) (“a nonpartisan, independent policy research organization dedicated to innovative research and analysis that promotes global security, prosperity, and freedom”). In a thoughtful [new article](#) in the journal *National Affairs*, he argues that think tanks have proliferated to the point of devaluing the research and ideas that come out of them. Most damning, he suggests that these institutions — once thought of as “universities without students” — have become political, stripping them of the power to float new ideas that politicians would never put forward.

Outside of Washington, Troy’s criticism resonates for a reason that may disturb academic researchers: it is the work of think tanks, and not cloistered scholars at traditional universities, that really influences Washington policy. In his article, Troy unearths a telling 1988 quote from Ronald Reagan: “Today the most important American scholarship comes out of our think tanks,” the president said, pointing to one in particular, the [American Enterprise Institute](#).

From the creation of AEI in 1938 (originally the American Enterprise Association), Troy traces a dizzying think tank “arms race.” Like some of the earliest think tanks, including Brookings (1916), the Hoover Institute (1919) and the RAND Corporation (1946), AEI was long in the business of informing but not advocating. The conservative Heritage Foundation was born in the early ’70s as a direct response to AEI’s hands-off approach. Heritage became extremely effective at not just pondering ideas but also pushing them, particularly in an era when conservative public intellectuals didn’t feel welcome in academia.

Liberals, startled by the effectiveness of Heritage, created their own counterpoint at the end of the Reagan era, the [Progressive Policy Institute](#), which powered many of the ideas that came out of the Clinton administration. Conservatives in exile from the federal government in this era created yet more think tanks, just as liberals did again during the George W. Bush years with the Center for American Progress. Troy refers to many of these think tanks as “governments in waiting.”

“Lose an election,” he quips, “gain a think tank.”

This evolution implies that the actual parties and the “nonpartisan” think tanks have been moving closer and closer together.

“You see this back-and-forth,” Troy said Thursday, speaking at a Hudson Institute-hosted discussion of the article. “And this back-and-forth raises two concerns in my mind: one is that there is sort of an original sin in their conception. They are founded as explicitly political organizations. And, if so, they will have a political lens with which they view things, and that will color what they do.”

In his article, Troy spends less time dwelling on the implications of this trend for actual research, the ways in which ideology can color the data output of these think tanks on everything from counting [green jobs](#) to measuring [climate change](#). He seems more interested in the impact on intellectual innovation.

“The other [concern] is the devaluation of the think tank,” he went on. “Just as the Weimar machine printed more and more currency to get out of their [economic problems](#), if you have more and more think tanks, and some of them are seen as political, that may devalue the work of the less political ones.”

Those 400 think tanks are just the ones located in Washington. Nationally, Troy puts the number at 1,800, up from about 45 after World War II. He collects some interesting statistics about the composition of scholars on staff in the era of the ever-expanding think tank. Among a representative sample of institutions founded before 1960, he says 53 percent of the current scholars hold doctorates. That number drops to 23 percent for think tanks founded between 1960 and 1980, and 13 percent to those founded in the last three decades. He singles out the Center for American Progress as an example of the new breed, describing its purpose as “not to generate new ideas so much as to defend Democratic political positions and promote Democratic policies.” In a world where think tanks may be becoming too political, he argues, such organizations are doing more to amplify ideas already on the table than to develop needed new ones. As a particularly troublesome sign of this blurring mission, he points to 501(c)(3) think tanks like American Progress that have created overt 501(c)(4) political advocacy arms.

To his credit, Troy hosted American Progress President [Neera Tanden](#) on Thursday to challenge his premises. And she insisted her organization has an “ideology,” a distinctly different thing from “partisanship.” Those two terms, though, have become increasingly synonymous in modern politics. It’s nearly impossible now to find in Washington a conservative Democratic or a liberal Republican. What if, soon, all of the researchers in town are tainted by those labels, too?