

Party ties corrupting think tanks

By TEVI TROY, Commentary

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The kerfuffle at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) has drawn attention to the hyper-politicization of the Washington think tank in recent years. The news that Charles and [David Koch](#) filed a lawsuit that would enable them to take greater control of Cato has been followed by accusations and counter-accusations that make it hard to figure out who is doing what to whom. What's clear, however, is that this fight is bad news for Cato's brand and for think tanks in general.

Think tanks have become enormously important to policy development over the past half-century. The [Brookings Institution](#) was deeply involved in the design of what became the Marshall Plan for the postwar redevelopment of Western Europe. The [American Enterprise Association](#) — now Institute — helped engineer the dismantling of wartime controls on production and prices. And Cato, as Eric Lichtblau reported in *The New York Times*, "has successfully injected libertarian views into Washington policy and political debates, and given them mainstream respectability."

In recent decades, however, think tanks — like much of our culture — have become increasingly political, starting with the emergence of the [Heritage Foundation](#), the first think tank to embrace advocacy as a goal. When [Ronald Reagan](#) was elected president in 1980, Heritage compiled a comprehensive conservative agenda for the new administration, which ultimately adopted over 60 percent of the more than 2,000 policy recommendations. Think tanks such as the Hoover Institution and AEI also worked closely with the administration.

Heritage's practical success helped usher in the era of what political scientist [Donald Abelson](#) has called the "advocacy think tank." New Washington think tanks have tended to be less scholarly but increasingly political and are more likely to be tied to the fortunes of a party or a wing within a party.

On the left came the [Progressive Policy Institute and Center for American Progress](#); on the right came the Project for the Republican Future, now the [Weekly Standard](#) magazine, and Empower America, now FreedomWorks.

For the most part, Cato has avoided this partisanship, criticizing or praising either major party based on deviations from or adherence to libertarian thinking.

Yet the struggle over Cato's leadership threatens to drag it down to that partisan place. Lichtblau wrote that the Kochs want "to establish a more direct pipeline between Cato and the family's Republican political outlets."

If true, it's worrisome, not just for Cato but think tanks in general, which may be harmed merely by association. If donors use think tanks as pawns in a political war, the value of

their product will be diminished in the eyes of the public, journalists and senior government officials.

As [Andrew Rich](#), author of "Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise," has written, "the known ideological proclivities of many, especially newer think tanks, and their aggressive efforts to obtain high profiles have come to undermine the credibility with which experts and expertise are generally viewed by public officials."

This potential for devaluation threatens think tanks' ability to find solutions to some of our nation's most serious problems. In an age of fast-paced politics and new media, think tanks can continue to play a useful role. Unfortunately, the proliferation of more — and more political — organizations, coupled with political struggles such as the one evolving at Cato, threaten the ability of Washington think tanks to play that role.

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