

Think tank politics

By Tevi Troy, Published: March 15

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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. This trend began after the emergence of the Heritage Foundation, which was 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. It contained more than 2,000 policy recommendations. By the end of Reagan’s second term, the administration had adopted more than 60 percent of the proposals.

Think tanks such as the Hoover Institution and AEI also worked closely with the administration. In 1988, Reagan said that “today the most important American

scholarship comes out of our think tanks — and none has been more influential than the American Enterprise Institute.”

Heritage’s practical success encouraged imitators and 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.

Moderate Democrats used the Progressive Policy Institute to help generate ideas for the Clinton administration. After Bill Clinton’s win in 1992, former Bush administration officials created the Project for the Republican Future and Empower America.

(Neither exists in its original incarnation: PRF staff morphed into the Weekly Standard magazine in 1995, and Empower America merged with Citizens for a Sound Economy to become FreedomWorks in 2004.)

This trend reached new heights in 2003 with the creation of the Center for American Progress, which emphasizes politics and message development and devotes as much as 40 percent of its resources to communication and outreach, founder John Podesta has said (he said in 2008 that this is eight times as much as typical liberal policy organizations).

As White House deputy communications director Jennifer Palmieri said in 2008, when she was CAP’s vice president for communications: “Others strive to be objective, we don’t.” Last year, the New York Times reported, CAP helped encourage Occupy Wall Street protests.

For the most part, Cato has avoided this. In fact, Cato’s strict libertarian line has been one of its advantages over the years. It has been willing to criticize — or praise — either major party based on deviations from or adherence to libertarian, and not partisan, thinking.

Yet the struggle over Cato’s leadership threatens to drag it down to the partisan place occupied by too many other think tanks. Lichtblau wrote in the Times that one

problem is that the Kochs want “to establish a more direct pipeline between Cato and the family’s Republican political outlets.”

If true, this is indeed worrisome. If donors see and 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.

But even if this is not the Koch brothers’ goal, the dispute is tarnishing Cato’s reputation as a place that can provide nonpartisan, if not non-ideological, research. The notion that donors can direct think tanks to act in political ways will damage think tanks that comply and can harm by association even those that do not.

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.”

AEI’s Karlyn Bowman told Rich that think tank currency resembles “paper money in Weimar — currency without a lot of value because of the proliferation and because of the open advocacy of some of the think tanks.”

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.