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## Five things I now think I think about think tanks

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Jim DeMint, president of the Heritage Foundation, was a topic of conversation in Wednesday's conference about think tanks at the Fletcher School at Tufts University. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

A combination of [energetic participants](#), [a fabulous fall New England day](#), and a stimulating topic made my [Thinking about Think Tanks conference](#) quite the lively event. Having a good mix of academics, actual think-tankers, and muckraking journalists helps. So did having an endless urn of coffee and lots of sweets.

After a full day of keynotes, anecdotes and panels, here are five things I learned about the think tank ecosystem that I don't think I really knew before.

**1) The think tank game has changed, man.** As the conference went on, there was a lot of nostalgia across the ideological spectrum for the glory days of the 1990s when the Clinton administration would listen to Heritage on occasion and think tanks could craft the consensus way to think about NATO expansion. Neither of those things would happen today.

What changed? The participants offered a welter of explanations. Some of the changes are good — a lot of participants noted that think tanks have gotten better at incubating younger analysts, rather than just acting as a semi-retirement home for Formers.

Some of the changes are not so good, however. Heritage's Kim Holmes pointed out that think tanks were merely following the country's political polarization, and this point was repeated by others. The Chicago Council's Rachel Bronson argued that 9/11 was the inflection point — that was the moment that think tanks stopped speaking only to policy elites and started speaking to a wider audience that was newly interested in international affairs. Several speakers alluded to the changed financial environment after the Great Recession, which leads to...

**2) Money matters, but not necessarily in the way you think.** As CNAS's Michele Flournoy explained, the effect of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent defense sequestration was to dry up the traditional sources of funding for think tanks (foundations, the U.S. government). As a result, there has been a turn toward other sources of funding, including foreign governments for some and corporate sponsorship for others. Does this warp think tank analyses? Even the muckraking journalists acknowledged that the problem is the lack of transparency more than out-and-out corruption. AEI's Danielle Pletka, however, was pretty blunt in explaining that *of course*

money was a factor in constraining and shaping what think tanks did. In particular, she argued that funders were a bigger constraint on think tank output than pure partisanship — for example, the ways in which some corporations pulled funding from think tanks that advocated the elimination of the ExIm bank. In some cases, however, the funders are sufficiently partisan that they get leery of cooperating with ideologically distinct patrons on a particular project.

**3) Think tanks are not just competing against each other.** One of the facts that just about every think tanker repeated was the observation that their world is no longer one of AEI competing against Brookings competing against CSIS with policy ideas. As Brookings's Ted Piccone put it: "We're all think tanks now." By that he meant that a lot of old and new institutions are not competing in the same space as stand-alone think tanks: university-based research institutes, law firms, consulting firms, and operational philanthropic agencies, such as the Gates Foundation. It's this wider universe that has created a harsher competitive environment inside the Beltway.

**4) Think tanks have a problem with policy innovation.** This came through loud and clear from several participants, including keynote speaker and Center for New American Security CEO Michèle Flournoy. The bias among large think tanks in particular was against innovative ideas. This was true for a lot of reasons — including the money — but the biggest one seemed to be simple careerism. Policy analysts do not have an incentive to propose policy ideas that could come back to haunt them later in their career. Or, as Cato's Justin Logan noted, for think tanks to have impact, "we have to suck up to power; what does power want from us?" For more on this problem, see [Jeremy Shapiro's acerbic take](#) on consulting with senior officials.

**5) The best thing that think tanks do is not what you think they do.** Generally, one imagines that the principal thing that think tanks do is churn out policy ideas. They're called *think tanks*, for Pete's sake. But again and again, actual think-tankers pointed out that a big comparative advantage is their convening function. Think tanks can organize forums with more variegated participants that governments, for various reasons, cannot. Think tanks therefore serve as more useful clearing houses for information than is commonly realized. As Chatham House's Xenia Wickett pointed out, the answers she would get from foreign government officials when she was working at the National Security Council were very different from the answers those same government officials gave her after she moved to a think tank. Think tanks can serve as interlocutors between official and not-so-official representatives, and that is indeed a useful function.