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Post-Print of U.S. Think Tanks Facing Increasing Political Pressure

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] As principal entities of policy experts, think tanks' provision of high-quality policy analysis constitutes their core competitive advantage and intrinsic value. [Method/Process] Based on observations of the current state of American think tanks, this article analyzes the major transformations occurring within these institutions. Some think tanks, in pursuit of political objectives, have gradually deviated from evidence-based analytical research in the policy consultation process. In response to this tendency toward politicization, the article proposes a two-pronged management practice encompassing both internal and external approaches. Think tanks must not only maintain information transparency but also effectively utilize internal quality control mechanisms and staff incentive systems to preserve their independence and objectivity. [Results/Conclusions] American think tanks require wise and strategic management to uphold their esteemed reputation and must also leverage assistance from foundations and civil society to evolve. The same applies to Chinese think tanks; even in their early stages of development, they must safeguard their reputation, adhere to rigorous analytical research, and provide objective policy recommendations.

Full Text

U.S. Think Tanks under Increasingly Politicized Pressure: Politics, Governance and Quality Decision-Making Consultation

By Raymond Struyk¹

Translated and Compiled by Zou Jingya² and Li Gang²

Abstract

Think tanks, as primary providers of policy expertise, derive their core competitiveness and value from delivering high-quality policy analysis. Based on observations of the current state of U.S. think tanks, this paper analyzes major changes occurring within these institutions. Some think tanks have gradually abandoned their high standards of objectivity during policy consultation processes, no longer steadfastly championing evidence-based analysis and instead manipulating research findings to achieve political objectives. If think tanks cease their efforts to conduct quality analytical research, the entire community will fail to achieve breakthroughs and development in analytical paradigms where it once held strong advantages, and its special role in policy formulation may be severely weakened. To address this politicization trend, the article proposes management practices through both internal and external channels. Think tanks must not only maintain information transparency but also effectively utilize internal quality control systems and employee incentive mechanisms to preserve their independence and objectivity. Wise management and support from foundations and civil society are essential for U.S. think tanks to sustain their strong reputations. The same applies to Chinese think tanks, which, even in their early developmental stages, must protect their reputations by adhering to rigorous analysis and research to provide objective policy recommendations.

Keywords: U.S. think tank; decision-making consultation; politicization; evidence-based research; transparency; internal incentive

Classification: C931

Think tanks play multiple roles in contemporary society, with their function as policy experts being the most prominent. They produce high-quality, objective policy analysis grounded in social science research and devote considerable effort to improving policy decision-making, which constitutes their primary focus of attention. However, the substantial contributions think tanks have made to survey research and econometric analysis have not received adequate recognition, despite forming the foundation of their research activities. In this regard, several U.S. research institutions have developed various models for survey research and created software for data analysis and processing, aiming to further enhance survey data quality and ensure objective, accurate analytical results. For example, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago pioneered exemplary sampling survey methodologies that remain widely used today. Additionally, breakthroughs in econometric analysis—such as Nobel laureate Daniel L. McFadden’s development of conceptual frameworks and models for analyzing discrete choice behavior, and improvements in computer software for dynamic modeling and simulation—have significantly advanced and refined data analysis methods.

This paper examines, on one hand, the current state of U.S. think tanks and certain internal changes that place these institutions under greater pressure. Some think tanks have gradually abandoned their high standards of objectivity during

policy consultation processes, no longer steadfastly championing evidence-based analysis and instead manipulating research findings to achieve political objectives. If think tanks cease their efforts to conduct quality analytical research, the entire community will fail to achieve breakthroughs and development in analytical paradigms where it once held strong advantages, and its special role in policy formulation may be severely weakened. On the other hand, this paper offers practical recommendations to counteract this trend through both internal and external forces, thereby reinforcing decision-making consultation grounded in empirical research.

2.1 Types and Characteristics of U.S. Think Tanks

Think tanks are typically independent, private policy research institutions that employ experts to conduct research on specific policy areas or broader policy issues, actively providing policy education and decision-making recommendations to policymakers and the public through various channels[1]. Born in the early twentieth century, U.S. think tanks have a development history spanning over one hundred years, characterized by longevity, large numbers, and extensive experience in policy consultation. According to the latest “2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” by James G. McGann, the United States currently hosts approximately 1,800 think tanks. While this statistic may not be entirely accurate, it sufficiently demonstrates that the U.S. is the world’s leading think tank power with enormous influence. McGann also categorizes think tanks into seven types based on their primary nature: autonomous independent think tanks, semi-independent think tanks, government think tanks, quasi-government think tanks, university-affiliated think tanks, party think tanks, and for-profit corporate think tanks[2]. Different types of think tanks exhibit not only formal and organizational differences but also varying degrees of independence, autonomy, and corresponding forms of sponsorship. Among them, autonomous independent think tanks are the most numerous, accounting for 75% of all U.S. think tanks; semi-independent think tanks rank second at 15-20%; while the remaining types collectively constitute only 5-10%. Thus, the U.S. think tank landscape is dominated by these first two categories, which naturally become the focus of this paper.

Regardless of type, all U.S. think tanks share two common characteristics. First, they universally emphasize independence. Independence, widely proclaimed as a defining feature, is crucial for U.S. think tanks—it is their lifeline and essential for securing a public role in society[3]. This determines the degree of trust think tanks can obtain from government and society, as they must prevent control and influence from government agencies, political parties, or major financial sponsors. Second, all think tanks share two fundamental responsibilities: conducting policy research and disseminating their work to enhance influence. The transmission of think tank outputs to policymakers and social groups is particularly emphasized by U.S. think tanks, as it directly relates to their influence and reputation. They disseminate research findings through various media and plat-

forms, and also leverage the “revolving door” and other channels to continuously transmit their intellectual contributions through personnel.

As noted above, autonomous independent think tanks comprise three-quarters of all U.S. think tanks, forming the backbone of the American think tank community. These institutions typically possess greater autonomy and independence, striving to uphold traditional core values and research methods while fulfilling their role in policy society. Autonomous independent think tanks exhibit four main characteristics:

First, private status. Economically, these think tanks do not depend on sponsors; although they may receive substantial fixed and regular funding, such support cannot dictate their independent analysis and research. Their analytical results and reports are typically more objective and impartial. Second, non-profit nature. Unlike for-profit organizations, think tanks must widely share their research findings rather than profit from them. The resources they obtain are not intended to accumulate wealth for managers and staff but to seek value and influence in the policy-making process, thereby enhancing the think tank’s reputation and credibility. Third, independence. While all think tanks emphasize independence, this category particularly claims to be completely independent and serving the public interest. Nevertheless, only a tiny minority achieves complete independence; most possess only relative independence. Fourth, engagement in policy research. This is not merely a responsibility but a mission. Think tanks must continuously strive to influence public policy, which requires autonomous independent think tanks to employ researchers with professional skills and knowledge. Without their participation, think tanks would be like water without a source or a tree without roots.

2.2 Semi-Independent Think Tanks in the United States

In the composition of U.S. think tanks, semi-independent think tanks represent an important force alongside the dominant autonomous independent think tanks. However, compared to independent think tanks, this category appears to be altering certain essential characteristics of think tanks and affecting the unique traditional position of the American think tank community in the policy-making process.

As the name suggests, semi-independent think tanks are non-independent, and their claimed independence is frequently suspect. While U.S. semi-independent think tanks are typically independent from government, they are controlled by interest groups, donors, or other collectives (such as non-party groups united by political or ideological factors) that provide substantial financial support and significantly influence think tank development. Moreover, because semi-independent think tanks rely exclusively on private donors for fundraising, a serious problem has become increasingly prominent in recent years: these think tanks depend on and focus on donors who can provide large sums of money. An even more extreme model exists where some semi-independent think tanks rely

so heavily on politically active core donors that they degenerate into appendages of political parties, even employing staff as professional lobbyists to influence government. For example, the Heritage Foundation actually depends heavily on conservative Republican-oriented supporters whose funding constitutes an important component of the think tank's financial resources and influences its research perspectives to some extent.

Furthermore, the research outputs of semi-independent think tanks face numerous challenges. On one hand, the scientific rigor of their research methods and the objectivity of their findings are sometimes questioned. During analytical research, semi-independent think tanks often need to consider the political viewpoints of certain groups and emphasize the "marketability" of their analytical products. Fearful of losing funding, they reluctantly accept sponsors' suggestions, ultimately tending to select information that supports certain viewpoints while abandoning objective analytical results. Alternatively, some semi-independent think tanks cherry-pick favorable arguments from other articles or research findings to compile into their own research outputs, directly producing such "selective conclusions." These research products are often predictable, deviating from the fundamentals of empirical analysis and weakening the inherent analytical advantages of the think tank community. On the other hand, compared to independent think tanks, semi-independent think tanks invest fewer resources in research and more in arranging various dissemination activities. Consequently, their long-term neglect of strengthening analytical research capabilities places them at a competitive disadvantage.

In fact, as think tank dissemination activities have surged over the past two decades in the United States, competition among think tank policy elites has intensified. Substantial evidence demonstrates that autonomous independent think tanks operate more efficiently than semi-independent ones and exert greater influence in national policy arenas. Truly independent think tanks often seize the initiative, investing substantial time in systematic analytical work at the early stages of a policy debate while continuously emphasizing the enhancement of their research and dissemination capabilities to secure competitive advantages. Think tanks lacking objectivity and independence will face greater pressures.

3 How to Control the Politicization Trend in Think Tanks

Given the aforementioned situation, how can think tanks control this politicization trend and prevent the loss of their objectivity? This requires adopting both internal and external approaches to help think tanks maintain their independence and preserve their unique value in the policy domain.

3.1 External Factors: Enhancing Information Transparency Think tank information transparency refers to the degree to which information regarding think tank management, research outputs, and funding is publicly available and accessible. Since think tanks may have potential conflicts of interest that

can cause numerous problems, enabling policy actors and the public to access such public information—and to understand key areas frequently discussed—will allow them to make better judgments about these potential conflicts and the quality of think tank work. This also facilitates establishing good relationships between think tanks and external groups such as sponsors and media. Transparency concerning boards of directors and funding sources is particularly important.

3.1.1 Focusing on the Board of Directors: Key Actors in Think Tank Governance Since most U.S. think tanks implement a board management system (some use a council system), although board functions vary across think tanks of different sizes, a balanced and reasonable board composition significantly influences think tank development directions. Therefore, when forming boards, think tanks need to recruit members from diverse backgrounds. Foremost is balancing partisan affiliations—the more politically diverse the board members, the more the think tank’s non-partisan nature and independence are highlighted. Second, maintaining gender, ethnic, and regional balance also promotes board diversity and breaks the closed image of think tanks, such as hiring members from multiple major cities or ethnic groups[1]. Third, occupational and multi-sectoral diversity must be emphasized, including not only elites from academia, politics, and business but also individuals with media experience. Only with such varied professional backgrounds can think tank boards effectively address various organizational issues.

Meanwhile, after determining board composition, think tanks must list basic information for all board members on their official websites, such as personal positions, affiliated institutions, and expertise. If such information is missing, think tanks must take notice and supplement it after careful verification. Compared to other think tank personnel, board members have greater advantages in showcasing organizational image, as their identities inherently convey information about the think tank[1]. Moreover, boards play crucial roles in ensuring that think tanks fulfill their missions and adhere to evidence-based research orientations. Making this information public helps enhance policymakers’ trust in think tanks and promotes more objective evaluations of these institutions by the professional community.

3.1.2 Disclosing Funding Sources Funding is a crucial factor for think tank survival and stable development. U.S. think tanks receive financial support from various channels annually, and the sources and uses of these funds naturally become matters of public concern. Without disclosing funding sources, it becomes difficult to assess the objectivity of think tank research positions, and potential conflicts of interest or political objectives may face widespread speculation. Since 2014, think tank sponsors have generally believed that think tanks should publicly disclose their funding sources, with particular attention paid to sponsor lists posted on think tank websites, including corporations, institutions, and individuals[1]. In response, Transparify—an organization monitoring think tank

transparency—has published annual evaluation reports on its website since 2013, revealing the degree to which think tanks disclose their funding sources. These reports have attracted considerable attention from think tank sponsors.

In its evaluation reports, Transparify surveyed 169 think tanks worldwide, constructing a “5-star rating system” based on financial source information publicly available on think tank websites and assigning star ratings (0-5 stars) according to each think tank’s transparency level. According to the latest 2016 report, think tank transparency has improved significantly over the past four years (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]), with high information disclosure and financial transparency becoming a global trend. U.S. think tanks achieved an average score of 3.3 out of 5 in the current year’s rating, representing an improvement from 2.1 points in 2013. Moreover, as think tanks increasingly emphasize transparency, those with high transparency levels (i.e., 4-5 stars) now exceed half of all surveyed think tanks. This suggests that relatively closed think tanks may be marginalized in policy arenas and even risk losing funding, as a considerable portion of think tank donors currently use this rating system as a basis for deciding whether to provide financial support, forcing think tanks to prioritize disclosure of their financial information.

Figure 1 Rating results & trends for global think tanks transparency (2013-2016)[4]

3.2 Internal Factors: Two Effective Think Tank Management Practices To maintain think tank independence and objectivity, internal management must not be overlooked in addition to the external factors discussed above, as it largely determines research objectivity. If think tanks are to guarantee high-quality research, they must emphasize improving professional research standards and implementing necessary personnel incentive measures.

3.2.1 Enhancing Think Tank Research Standards High-quality analytical research is a key factor in maintaining think tank credibility. To provide quality policy advisory services to decision-makers, think tanks must first establish professional and structurally sound research teams. They should select an organizational model based on research projects and actual development conditions: either having individual influential researchers lead projects with one or two assistants, or forming a core team to collaboratively complete research[1]. Of course, think tanks can flexibly adjust their approach rather than rigidly adhering to one model, adopting different structures for different contexts. Additionally, think tanks need to employ senior researchers to continuously enhance analytical competence and competitiveness in specific research areas. Excellent senior researchers possess not only extensive professional knowledge and experience and strong analytical skills but also the ability to absorb diverse perspectives. A researcher’s analytical capabilities are primarily measured by their previously published academic work, particularly articles in top-tier peer-reviewed journals, where output quality is especially important.

Second, think tanks must establish continuously improving quality control procedures to vet research outputs. Particularly in recent years, as the volume of think tank products has surged, quality control has become an urgently important issue. If disseminated think tank products contain quality problems, regardless of the magnitude of errors, the think tank's reputation will be seriously affected. For example, in 2013, the United States witnessed fierce debate over whether the immigration reform law should "grant amnesty" to previously undocumented immigrants, with some arguing this would increase costs. Meanwhile, the Heritage Foundation in Washington released a research report by its fellows Robert Rector and Jason Richwine that overestimated the incremental costs of such amnesty, drawing various negative comments from expert groups who questioned not only its research methodology but also whether political motivations had been introduced. Such errors cast a shadow over the researchers' careers and damage the credibility of the think tank's other research outputs.

Therefore, think tanks need to implement strict quality control, preferably formalized into a written quality control policy. This policy should be both realistic and flexible, covering all types of products think tanks produce and specifying different review rules, intensity, reviewers, and responsibilities for each product category. Meanwhile, management should make this policy document available to all internal members so that relevant personnel can familiarize themselves with review procedures, facilitating automatic and smooth implementation of internal quality control. On this basis, think tanks must ensure that all written products delivered to clients or scheduled for publication have fully undergone appropriate review processes. Reviewers should focus on the rigor of analytical methods, verifying whether conclusions are objective and political positions are neutral and unbiased. This is not merely an error-correction process but helps elevate research standards and quality. In fact, many senior researchers proactively invite peer review of their work from think tank colleagues after completing research reports, which greatly benefits both individual researchers and institutional reputations.

A particularly important yet easily overlooked issue is that think tanks must review not only written products but also researchers' upcoming public speeches, preferably through advance rehearsals. Even when speeches are based on approved research reports, researchers may deviate from content to better attract policy audiences. This is especially true for emotionally expressive researchers who, when speaking publicly, may become overly excited or anxious and stray from the original report. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to rehearse multiple times using slides and undergo review by experienced think tank personnel. Think tanks must also prepare "crisis management" plans to respond promptly to potential quality control failures. Sometimes making mistakes is not terrible; what is terrible is remaining silent about them. Adopting correct and proactive responses is the appropriate attitude for think tanks.

3.2.2 Internal Employee Incentives Intellectual resources are the foundation of think tanks, and employees constitute their core strength. As the global think tank industry has emerged and developed, competition for talent among think tanks has intensified, making the retention of excellent employees and the stimulation of their productivity universal concerns for these institutions. According to a 2001 Urban Institute survey of think tanks in nine Eastern European countries and the Commonwealth of Independent States, “employee incentives” ranked first among training program needs[5]. Incentives for internal staff profoundly affect think tank productivity and determine operational success or failure. Therefore, to stimulate employee enthusiasm and ensure researchers maintain objectivity in their analysis, think tanks should implement incentive mechanisms that combine rewards and penalties, and establish an annual performance appraisal system as an important management tool for motivating employee improvement. Since managers may not fully understand employee performance, annual performance appraisals can, on one hand, quantify evaluation criteria for work outcomes, better assess employee performance over a given period, and serve as a basis for rewards and penalties. On the other hand, think tanks can use these appraisals to identify new positions and goals for employees and develop tailored development plans for different personnel, which greatly helps improve work efficiency.

Through performance evaluations, think tanks should reward employees who demonstrate outstanding performance or make significant contributions, such as publishing articles in top-tier peer-reviewed journals or participating in policy discussions with sponsors and policy communities. Such rewards affirm employee work value and enhance their self-satisfaction with the think tank. Rewards include both material and non-material incentives. Material rewards are typically more direct; stable and generous salaries often greatly attract researchers, while reasonable bonus distributions and benefits also help retain employees and maintain organizational stability, including medical subsidies, insurance and pension benefits, leave, and paid academic sabbaticals. Paid academic sabbaticals, in particular, enable researchers to focus on their work, allowing them more time to complete papers or books. Additionally, non-material rewards are important means of motivating researchers. By providing employees with greater development space for advancement, think tanks address key concerns in researchers’ career development. Especially now, as think tanks increasingly focus on global engagement, researchers need to connect with international networks. Funding employee participation in more international conferences not only broadens their perspectives but also creates more development opportunities for think tanks. When implementing these incentive measures, think tanks must carefully consider their own circumstances, analyze the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, and select methods more suitable for their employees to formulate internal incentive plans.

Since the controversial election of Donald Trump as the 45th U.S. President and his administration’s promotion of the “America First” conservative stance, policy decision-making has become more influenced by viewpoints and ideology

than by facts and actual analysis. These changes in American politics pose numerous challenges for U.S. think tank development. Although U.S. think tanks can continue to maintain their strong reputations, this requires wise management, adherence to evidence-based research, and ideally, obtaining funding and support from foundations and civil society to secure the think tank community's position in policy arenas. Similarly, for Chinese think tanks, even in the early stages of industry development, it is essential to protect their reputations by insisting on rigorous analytical research, ensuring the scientific quality and objectivity of research outputs, and providing higher-quality policy recommendations for decision-makers.

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