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Design and Application of the Multiple Streams Model for US Think Tank Influence on Policy Agenda-Setting: A Postprint

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Date: 2017-11-05T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] A primary objective of think tanks is to influence public policy; therefore, the question of how think tanks impact public policy merits in-depth examination. [Method/Process] This paper adopts a policy process perspective, focusing primarily on the early stages of the process, and uses U.S. think tanks as a case study to analyze think tank influence on public policy. Drawing on the classic “Multiple Streams” framework from public policy analysis, this paper proposes an influence mechanism model for think tanks based on the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream. Combined with actual cases of three types of representative U.S. think tanks, it conducts an in-depth analysis and discussion of think tanks’ positioning and modes of influence within this model. [Result/Conclusion] Think tanks play a crucial role in public policy agenda-setting; in this process, they primarily influence the problem stream through media promotion and public opinion, guide the policy stream through their own research capacity and reputational influence, and affect the political stream through personnel exchanges with core government departments, with different types of think tanks emphasizing different aspects. The Multiple Streams influence mechanism model provides a theoretical framework for examining the issue of think tank influence on public policy in the early stages of the policy process, and the case analysis based on U.S. think tanks also offers insights for China in promoting new-type think tank development.

Full Text

The Design and Application of a Multiple Streams Model for American Think Tanks' Influence on Policy Agenda Setting

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] One of the primary objectives of think tanks is to influence public policy, making it essential to understand the nature and mechanisms of their impact. **[Method/Process]** This paper adopts a policy process perspective, focusing specifically on the front end of the process, to analyze how American think tanks influence public policy. Drawing on John Kingdon's classic "multiple streams" framework, we propose a theoretical model that explains think tank influence mechanisms through three streams: the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream. We then examine three representative types of American think tanks to analyze their positioning and influence strategies within this model. **[Result/Conclusion]** Think tanks exert significant influence on public policy agenda setting, primarily by shaping the problem stream through media exposure and public opinion, guiding the policy stream through research capacity and reputation, and affecting the political stream through personnel exchanges with core government departments. Different types of think tanks emphasize different aspects of this model. The multiple streams framework provides a theoretical structure for analyzing think tank influence during the initial stages of the policy process, and the case studies of American think tanks offer valuable insights for China's new think tank construction.

Keywords: think tanks; public policy; problem stream; policy stream; political stream

Classification Number: C932.2

Introduction

Think tanks are institutions where ideas are generated and stored, and their primary objective is to influence public policy—directly or indirectly, in the short or long term—through various channels and methods. In recent years, as nations have increasingly emphasized scientific and effective decision-making, the world has witnessed a new wave of think tank development. According to the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania, there were 6,846 think tanks worldwide in 2015, with the United States leading at 1,835 institutions. This raises a critical question: how exactly do think tanks in this think tank superpower influence public policy?

The question of “think tank influence on public policy” can be approached from multiple angles. From a policy type perspective, we could examine their impact on political, economic, social, scientific, technological, and foreign policies. From a policy process perspective, we could analyze their influence on policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, termination, and oversight. From a temporal perspective, we could observe their short-, medium-, and long-term impacts. Alternatively, from an “influence” perspective, we could categorize their effects by method, domain, and degree. These classifications aim to clarify analytical logic rather than imply hierarchical importance, and existing research on this topic generally falls within these categories. This is also true for studies on American think tanks’ influence on public policy. Notably, under the guidance of Professor Liu Wenxiang at Hubei University, several graduate students conducted in-depth single-case analyses of multiple renowned American think tanks in their dissertations, each attempting to construct a comprehensive analytical framework. However, given the large number and diverse types of American think tanks, any attempt at comprehensive coverage risks being overly general, often resulting in mere rearrangements of existing facts without significant theoretical contribution.

Therefore, this paper takes a focused approach by analyzing only one dimension of American think tanks’ influence on public policy, aiming to build a theoretical framework for this specific analytical perspective. This approach both systematizes previous research and provides a reference for future studies from the same viewpoint. As Andrew Rich noted in his analysis of think tanks and policy experts, experts’ academic advisory role is most prominent during the early stages of policy agenda setting, while later stages merely provide decision-makers with a form of justification. Following this insight, this paper adopts a policy process perspective, concentrating exclusively on the front end of the process and using American think tanks as a case study. Existing literature demonstrates that while American think tanks influence various policy domains to differing degrees, their methods of influence share many commonalities. Consequently, this paper focuses primarily on the methods and channels of influence, paying less attention to the specific domains or degrees of impact.

1. Establishing the Multiple Streams Model

The multiple streams framework was proposed by the renowned American policy scientist John W. Kingdon in his book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. Through four years of field research, Kingdon opened the “black box” at the front end of policy formulation, using authentic cases to illustrate how public problems become public policies in American politics. The multiple streams framework thus focuses primarily on the policy agenda-setting process—the initial stage of the entire policy process. Kingdon argued that the policy system contains three distinct and largely independent streams: the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream. At critical moments, these three streams converge to open a “policy window,” thereby launching the policy agenda. This

represents the crucial and most dramatic stage of policy enactment. Since think tanks' primary function is to "promote ideas to public policymakers," their most significant influence occurs before policy enactment. This paper therefore focuses on the front end of the policy process to examine the role think tanks play within it. Using Kingdon' s classification, we analyze three aspects—the problem stream, policy stream, and political stream—to construct our theoretical framework.

1.1 Problem Stream

Societies face numerous public problems, but which ones attract attention? Media exposure and public opinion are undoubtedly two interconnected and important pathways. This section therefore focuses on how think tanks influence media promotion and guide public opinion.

1.2 Policy Stream

In Kingdon' s depiction, various policy proposals and recommendations float, drift, and collide in a "policy primeval soup," with survivors emerging through a process akin to natural selection. Analyzing these surviving proposals requires focusing on the think tanks themselves, where researcher quality and product excellence play crucial roles. Effectively promoting their intellectual products to gain attention from the power core is also essential.

1.3 Political Stream

This dimension primarily involves changes within government or Congress itself, such as shifts in congressional majorities or key personnel adjustments. Our analysis therefore focuses on think tanks' relationships with power departments like government and Congress. Unlike the policy stream, this aspect emphasizes personnel angles rather than policy positions in interactions with the core power structure.

Based on these three dimensions, we can construct the analytical model shown below. The following sections use this model to discuss in greater depth how American think tanks influence policy agenda setting, focusing primarily on their methods and channels of influence.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

2. Influence on the Three Streams

2.1 Influence on the Problem Stream

Regarding the problem stream, think tanks primarily work to place their priority issues in prominent positions through media promotion and opinion guidance, thereby increasing issue visibility. Media communication and public opinion have always been mutually reinforcing and influential. Think tanks can achieve

influence through two channels: collaborating with media to shape opinion orientation, or interacting with the public to attract media attention.

Think tank-media collaboration is a process of shaping public image. In today's rapidly developing information and network environment, the United States at the forefront of technological development fully utilizes these convenient tools. Think tanks typically combine new media and self-media approaches: on one hand, their experts frequently appear in mainstream media, writing columns to increase exposure. For example, they debate or analyze issues on television and publish commentaries in newspapers. Think tank experts appear regularly on major American broadcast networks such as ABC, NBC, FOX, and CNN, as well as in leading newspapers including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. On the other hand, to attract younger generations, think tanks have begun using self-media channels like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and even mobile apps to disseminate ideas and enhance influence.

Think tank-public interaction typically occurs through two major avenues. The first is publications. In addition to articles in various newspapers and magazines, major American think tanks publish numerous journals, monographs, and research reports annually, with many renowned think tank publications establishing long-term and profound influence. The second is hosting various seminars, lectures, and training activities. American think tanks frequently hold conferences—large and small—to discuss hot-button issues and release research findings. For well-known think tanks, holding over a hundred such events annually is normal, and most are open to the public. The internet has also made it convenient for the public to access this information; those unable to attend in person can obtain relevant materials online, and these seminars sometimes attract media participation. Additionally, short-term training programs serve as important vehicles for think tanks to guide public opinion.

2.2 Influence on the Policy Stream

Regarding the policy stream, think tank influence primarily manifests in how they appropriately and convincingly demonstrate the effectiveness and feasibility of their proposals through professional research capacity. This undoubtedly demands high standards. Overall, with over 1,800 think tanks in the United States, it is no exaggeration to say that American think tank research has completely covered all areas of public policy. Specialized or comprehensive think tanks conduct research across politics, economics, science and technology, healthcare, military affairs, education, and other fields. Although different think tanks have varying research priorities, their strategies for making their proposals stand out are largely similar, falling into three main categories.

First, assembling high-level research teams. Most think tank researchers have received specialized academic training in particular fields, with many holding doctoral degrees or being exceptional master's graduates. As times have changed,

many think tanks have expanded beyond scientific research to include practical dimensions, bringing action-oriented practitioners into their ranks, such as former politicians, entrepreneurs, and social activists. Regardless of personnel composition, all think tanks share characteristics of intellectual elites and a commitment to producing high-quality research. Only by ensuring high standards and quality can they influence policymakers' choices. Simultaneously, think tanks emphasize cultivating new researchers through internship programs and even establishing their own graduate schools, enabling younger generations to develop capabilities through practice and study.

Second, direct communication with the power core. American think tank experts can engage directly with government officials through speeches at government departments, letters to political leaders, briefings, research reports, and even serving as advisors to administrative agencies. For example, Bill Frenzel of the Brookings Institution and C. F. Bergsten of the Peterson Institute for International Economics both serve as advisors on the Trade Policy and Negotiations Advisory Committee in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

Third, testifying at congressional hearings. Congressional hearings represent a unique feature of the American policy process, with bills requiring passage through various committees in both the House and Senate. After a policy proposal gains attention through preliminary efforts, hearings become the critical link in its transformation into formal policy. Conversely, hearings also provide important venues for think tank experts to promote alternative proposals when other viewpoints exist. Members of Congress, stakeholders, think tank experts, and others express opinions based on electoral considerations, political positions, and values. Think tank experts are frequently invited to provide testimony, directly influencing members of Congress and potentially shaping powerful political opinion.

2.3 Influence on the Political Stream

Regarding the political stream, think tank influence primarily manifests during presidential transitions and personnel adjustments, specifically through serving as advisors to presidential candidates and the distinctively American “revolving door” mechanism. These two aspects are complementary. Advising presidential candidates conveniently leverages campaign promotional activities to disseminate policy positions, while presidential transitions simultaneously drive political stream dynamics and push policy hotspots to the forefront. The “revolving door” mechanism’s influence is more long-term, with the resulting interpersonal networks affecting the entire policy process.

As the name suggests, the “revolving door” refers to individuals rotating between government and think tank positions. The most politically significant movement is from think tanks into government—realizing personnel adjustments. New administrations represent critical periods for personnel changes, and think tank scholars who contributed significantly to presidential campaigns are often

brought into government and given important positions.

3. Case Studies of American Think Tanks

3.1 Classification of American Think Tanks

American think tanks vary greatly in scale, funding sources, structure, and research domains, allowing for multiple classification approaches based on affiliation, organizational structure, or policy and philosophical orientation. This paper adopts the classification method of James G. McGann, a researcher at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, categorizing think tanks into academic, contract, and advocacy types. These three types correspond to different stages of American think tank development. Academic think tanks emerged around the early 20th century during the Progressive Era when America needed expert advice to address social contradictions during rapid development and transformation. Contract think tanks arose from the post-WWII period through the 1960s, when the United States required intellectual support and technical assurance to maintain its superpower status during the Cold War, focusing primarily on military-industrial research. Advocacy think tanks emerged primarily in the 1970s-80s, characterized by strong ideological and partisan colors due to international developments.

Academic think tanks, metaphorically called “universities without students,” include representative institutions like the Brookings Institution (established 1927) and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace (established 1919). Their researchers maintain high academic standards, with funding primarily from foundations, corporations, and individual donations. They are committed to applying scientific knowledge to research and solve broad public policy problems, maintaining strong independence and objectivity. Their goal is not necessarily to directly influence policy formulation but to produce high-quality research results.

Contract think tanks maintain a principal-agent relationship with government, with typical representatives including RAND Corporation (established 1948) and the Urban Institute (established 1968). Government signs research contracts based on needs, and results are submitted directly to government as reports rarely made public. Despite special relationships with government and funding primarily from governmental sources, their research maintains objectivity and scientific rigor because their responsibility is to provide high-quality, practical solutions to urgent real-world problems.

Advocacy think tanks differ significantly from the previous two types, typically having distinct partisan and policy orientations. Representative examples include The Heritage Foundation (established 1973) and the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (established 1977). Their funding primarily comes from interested large corporations and financial groups. Their research purpose is not primarily to study policy itself but to promote political positions, win current policy debates, and help their supported parties achieve political

outcomes. Consequently, the objectivity of such think tanks' research is questionable.

3.2 Positioning Analysis of Three Types of Think Tanks in the Multiple Streams Model

We now select the most representative examples from each category—Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, and The Heritage Foundation—to analyze their specific positioning within our multiple streams model. Table 1 provides a brief overview of these three think tanks. In the United States, a think tank with approximately 100 people is considered large, so all three are notably substantial in scale. Additionally, all three have comprehensive and diversified research domains. Brookings focuses relatively more on policy areas, RAND emphasizes military and technological fields, while Heritage has recently concentrated on fundamental areas like politics and economics as well as urgent policy research.

Based on the characteristics discussed above, we can summarize the focus areas of each think tank type within the multiple streams model in Table 2 .

As shown, think tanks in the policy stream aim to gain recognition and acceptance from the power core for their policy proposals. However, academic think tanks like Brookings prioritize scientific objectivity and quality, which guarantees absolute standards but may not quickly attract policymakers' attention in the short term, though their long-term influence should not be underestimated. The problem stream emphasizes increasing issue visibility to transform problems into agenda items, but contract think tanks like RAND face no such concerns since their research topics are already core priorities. For think tanks, the political stream primarily involves internal exchanges with power core personnel, and advocacy think tanks' close relationships with their supported parties—often including intimate personal relationships with government officials—are unmatched by the other two types.

3.3.1 Brookings Institution The Brookings Institution, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is the first modern think tank in American history and the earliest non-profit institution conducting public policy research. Based on Table 2' s positioning, our analysis of Brookings focuses primarily on the problem and political streams. We devote less attention to the policy stream not because the institution neglects this aspect, but because its research capacity and quality are so deeply ingrained that they form the cornerstone of its global reputation. On its official website, “quality,” “independence,” and “influence” are prominently featured. The institution' s reputation continuously attracts top global talent, and as previously noted, short-term policy influence is not its primary pursuit.

In influencing the problem stream: First, Brookings scholars maintain high visibility in mainstream American media, appearing 14 times on U.S. evening television programs during the Gulf War month alone. The institution consistently ranks at the top in media citation rates, occasionally dropping to second

place. With technological development, particularly mobile intelligence, phones have become primary information tools, prompting Brookings to develop applications for Apple' s iOS, BlackBerry OS, Android, and Symbian operating systems. Second, in publications, Brookings publishes approximately 50 new books annually, with periodicals like *Brookings Review* (quarterly), *Brookings Papers*, and *Brookings Bulletin* (quarterly) representing exemplary think tank publications. The official website and social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter also regularly release and update research findings. Third, in public forums and conferences, Brookings holds hundreds of seminars annually worldwide to drive opinion dissemination and promote its achievements.

In influencing the political stream: Throughout its nearly 100-year history, the consistently non-partisan and independent Brookings Institution has played important roles in American power transitions and smooth governmental handovers. Regarding the revolving door, 32 Brookings scholars have joined the Obama administration alone, most notably Susan Rice, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and current Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

3.3.2 RAND Corporation RAND, short for “Research and Development Corporation,” is headquartered in Santa Monica, California. It originated from “Project RAND” in 1946, which aimed to promote connections between the U.S. military, government intelligence agencies, industry, and universities. Since most RAND research comes directly from U.S. government and military commissions, it requires minimal effort on issue selection and opinion guidance, focusing instead on producing high-quality research results. Our analysis of RAND therefore emphasizes its research and management characteristics.

In influencing the policy stream: The key for think tanks is to make their proposals objectively independent and high-quality while ensuring value acceptability and technical feasibility. RAND maintains strict research standards covering research questions, objectives, methods, data, assumptions, and policy recommendations, explicitly requiring language to be as accurate and accessible as possible, with research findings being eye-catching and practically valuable. These standards ensure proposals stand out. RAND also maintains rigorous internal quality review mechanisms, with reviewers being “outsiders” uninvolved in the projects to guarantee objectivity. In research implementation, RAND emphasizes interdisciplinary collaboration, with diverse and experienced backgrounds among its members, over 60% of whom hold doctoral degrees. For each topic, RAND develops multiple solutions leveraging complementary advantages across disciplines. Additionally, RAND integrates education and research through its own graduate school, where students can participate as interns, injecting youthful energy into the organization.

In influencing the political stream: Based on commissioned projects and funding support, RAND maintains close cooperation and intelligence exchange with the U.S. military and government, while also undertaking the task of cultivating and

delivering technical talent to the military and government—part of its graduate school’s function. This long-term exchange ensures RAND’s enduring influence within American power departments.

3.3.3 The Heritage Foundation The Heritage Foundation, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is a major policy research institution of the American New Right, characterized by strong ideological and partisan colors. Its fundamental position reflects conservative discourse, advocating small government, non-intervention, and defending traditional American values. As a Republican stronghold maintaining close contact with the White House, the foundation’s co-founder Joseph Coors was an important member of Reagan’s “Kitchen Cabinet.” As a typical advocacy think tank, Heritage’s primary goal is promoting its policy positions. Given its partisan nature, foundation members’ revolving door opportunities typically occur during Republican administrations, so we will not elaborate further on this aspect. Our analysis of Heritage therefore focuses more on its promotional methods and influence.

In influencing the problem stream: Few American think tanks match Heritage’s investment in media relations, typically accounting for over 20% of its total budget, which yields significant returns. Despite being established later and being relatively smaller than the previous two institutions, Heritage’s media influence consistently ranks among the top five nationally (in television, newspaper, and magazine citations) and in mainstream television news citations (ABC, NBC, CNN, CBS, FOX), leading all advocacy think tanks. The foundation grants hundreds of interviews annually and launched a political news talk show on television in the 1990s. In recent years, Heritage has actively used internet platforms to disseminate its positions and ideas, while cleverly leveraging online platforms to collect research materials, such as establishing technical systems like “online statistics” that allow public discussion of hot-button issues. In publications, Heritage’s output is extensive, with major periodicals including *Policy Review* (quarterly), *National Security Record*, *Heritage Today* (quarterly), and *Backgrounders*.

In influencing the policy stream: As a strong Republican supporter, Heritage maintains close relationships with party leaders, members of Congress, and senior government officials. The foundation is particularly skilled at promoting policy positions through Congress, aided by its advantageous location near Capitol Hill, where foundation leaders frequently dine with members of Congress and government officials. Heritage excels at producing timely, credible policy briefings delivered to Congress or congressional staff assistants at opportune moments, attracting decision-makers’ attention through concise, rapid-response methods.

Conclusion

Through in-depth analysis of these three representative American think tanks—Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, and The Heritage Foundation—we

can see that their influence on public policy covers all aspects of the multiple streams model established in Section 2, with each having distinct emphases and characteristics. In this think tank superpower, think tanks wield significant influence on public policy, particularly at the front end of the policy process, where their role in promoting and guiding issues and alternatives during agenda setting cannot be underestimated.

Using the classic multiple streams theory from policy analysis, this paper constructs an influence mechanism model showing that think tanks affect the problem stream through media promotion and public opinion, shape the policy stream through research capacity and reputation, and influence the political stream through personnel exchanges with core departments. Based on American think tank typology, we selected representative examples from three categories to analyze their positioning within the multiple streams model and their specific influence methods in each stream. It is worth emphasizing that these three streams inevitably interconnect in reality, so think tanks' influence methods and channels are also intertwined. Our classification merely aims to clarify analytical logic and complete theoretical chains. In essence, think tanks introduce more scientific and rational elements into American public policy formulation, and multi-party interaction ultimately promotes policy improvement and good governance—providing valuable lessons for China as it vigorously promotes new think tank construction.

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