

Methodological Approach: Typologies of Think Tanks

Unlike Stone, Donald Abelson applies a typology of think tanks by focusing on four distinctive periods of think tanks development to recognise the major features of think tanks connected with the four time periods: 1900 – 46, 1947 – 1970, 1978 – 89 and 1990 – 2009. To clarify the typology, some of the most prominent think tanks are profiled. Donald Abelson supports Weaver's identification of three types of think tanks in the policy-making community: universities without students (e.g. CFR and Brookings), government contractors (RAND or CSIS) and advocacy tanks (AEI and Heritage Foundation).²⁸

After World War I, domestic and foreign policy challenges led to the creation of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910), the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace (1919) and the Council on Foreign Relations (1921). As a result of the United States' emergence as a global power a small but influential elite set out to challenge American tendency toward isolationism. Internationally, there appeared to be a clear mandate for greater American involvement in global affairs, the foreign policy establishment wanted to convince political elites and the American public that it was in America's interest to play a greater role in international politics.²⁹

Since the turn of the 19th-20th century, think tanks have partially filled the need for independent analysis and thought. The creation of independent research institutes supported by private donations to conduct policy research and provide a forum for ideas and debate is a strongly American characteristic that originates from the nation's democratic, pluralistic and philanthropic tradition. Think tanks propose through independent and neutral research policy ideas to solve public problems or needs. This reasoned value-neutral approach to research has increased their influence in the policymaking community. As non-profit organisations, they are not controlled by the government and are not, in the most

²⁸ Abelson, Donald E.: *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*. 2nd Edition. Montreal, McGill-Quenn's University Press 2009, p. 18.

²⁹ McGann, James G.: *The Competition for Dollars, Scholars and Influence in the Public Policy Research Industry*. Lanham, University Press of America, 1995, p.46.

cases, aligned with any political party or special interest.³⁰ By comparing liberal think tanks created in the first decades of the twentieth century such as Brookings and CFR to those neoconservative advocacy think tanks comprising the AEI and the Heritage Foundation, one can observe the transformation of think tanks from non-partisan research institutes to openly ideological organisations committed to influencing the nation's agenda. Think tanks created during the Progressive Era placed more importance on providing government officials with policy expertise than to lobbying members of Congress and the executive or satisfying their donors. Devoid of the partisan interest of American politics they developed own areas of expertise, the first think tanks were devoted to the progress of knowledge. Nonetheless, think tanks should not be seen "as the sole guardians of the public interest without any political motivations".³¹

Think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution or AEI, represent universities without students that target with their long-term research the political climate and receive most gifts from a variety of donors in order to avoid client intrusion over certain advise.³² While typologies of think tanks have some use and validity for explanatory purposes, they should not be interpreted too literally. For instance, the Heritage Foundation, normally considered an advocacy think tank has also published some research resembling those studies of universities without students. Therefore Stone argues that models like Weaver's or McGann's do not allow hybrid forms.³³ Instead the term think tank is used to refer to institutions whose aims may change over time and whose researchers may become aligned to one another only shortly and for personal convenience.³⁴

Many think tanks conduct research in a simplified form.³⁵ At one side, policy institutes become indistinct with interest groups that are increasingly recognising the value of research and analysis in policy debate. At another side, think tanks cooperate with universities, while at another border they seem to become extra-political campaigning groups.³⁶ Some think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation have predictable policy findings. According to Diane Stone,

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 39-42.

³¹ Abelson, Donald E: Think Tanks in the United States. In: Stone, Diane/ Denham, Andrew/ Garnett, Mark (eds.): Think Tanks Across Nations. A Comparative Approach. Manchester, Manchester University Press 1998, pp. 107 – 126, (pp. 107- 110)

³² Ricci, David: The Transformation of American Politics. The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 20.

³³ Stone, Diane: Old Guard versus New Partisans. Think Tanks in Transition. Australian Journal of Political Science 1991, 26 (2), pp. 197 -213 (p. 201).

³⁴ Ricci, David: The Transformation of American Politics. The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 21.

³⁵ Stone, Diane: Capturing the Political Imagination. Think Tanks and the Policy Process. London, Frank Cass 1996, p. 12.

³⁶ Ibid, p.1.

their predictable positions arise not from vested interest but rather from a conservative set of principles and underlying ideology.³⁷ Transition tanks have emerged to provide advice for new incoming presidents. Presidential hopefuls set up their own think tank to develop policy agendas but into which they can channel campaign contributions. The non-profit status of the think tank allows the candidate to avoid compliance with federal limits on campaign contributions. Contrary to Abelson, Stone does not recognise in transition or candidate tanks research institutes but election platforms of the candidates for promoting their message and win the elections.³⁸ The thesis will illustrate the theoretical and methodological approaches by examining how policy-planning organisations reshaped the foreign policy agendas from a time of political transformation under Clinton to international crises under Bush Jr.³⁹

Think tanks serve in the advocacy coalition approach of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith as agents of learning. By acting as policy forum they generate cross-coalition learning, have long-term impact on policy analysis and operate within and restrain their activity to advocacy coalitions for policy change and knowledge utilisation. As a consequence there exists a symbiotic relationship between interests and knowledge.⁴⁰ These organisations play important roles in serving as a forum for debate, generating debate and developing medium-to-long-term ideas rather than following short-term policy goals.⁴¹ Throughout the book, views of think tank scholars (from AEI, CFR, Heritage Foundation, Brookings and Hoover Institutions) on foreign policy and national security are related to real-world developments (World War I and II, Cold War and the war on terror).⁴²

By the late 1970s, Capitol Hill had been flooded with highly aggressive advocates of ideology, commonly known as advocacy think tanks. Dissatisfied with domestic and foreign affairs, advocacy think tanks struggled to become integrated in decision-making. Rather than pursuing scholarly research in public service, their ambition rested in political advocacy. Think tanks like the Heritage

³⁷ Ibid, p.14.

³⁸ Ibid, p.17.

³⁹ Abelson, Donald E. "In the Line of Fire: Think Tanks, the War on Terror and Anti-Americanism," in Richard Higgott and Ivana Malbasic (eds), *The Political Consequences of Anti-Americanism*. London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 44-57.

⁴⁰ Sabatier, P.A./Jenkins-Smith, H.C. (eds.): *Policy Change and Learning. An Advocacy Coalition Approach*. Boulder, Westview Press, 1993

⁴¹ Stone, Diane: Introduction. *Think Tanks, Policy Advice, and Governance*. In: Stone, Diane/Denham, Andrew (eds.): *Think Tank Traditions, Policy Research, and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester, Manchester University Press 2004, pp. 1-16.

⁴² Abelson, Donald E.: *A War of Ideas: Think tanks and Terrorism*. *Policy Options*, 28 (3) March 2007, pp. 75-78.

Foundation increasingly looked alike interest groups and political action committees by lobbying decision-makers to implement ideologically compatible policies with their values and those shared by their corporate donors. In short, advocacy think tanks did not devote scholarly attention to their research, but strived to convey their conservative mission to the voters.⁴³

In assessing the influence of think tanks in government policy, scholars can interview or send questionnaires to both members of Congress and think tank experts involved in particular policy debate to determine how extensive a role think tanks played. Furthermore, they can compare the policy recommendations proposed by think tanks to the actual decisions made by government. Moreover, by assessing materials stored at the Library of Congress, it is possible to acquire a far more comprehensive understanding of the key actors that helped mould administration agendas. In fact, these themes are frequently evoked in newspapers before elections. Think tanks have become permanent fixtures in the policy-making process. That is why researchers must determine the most effective methods to evaluate their behavior.⁴⁴

Think tanks originally educated, informed and partially lobbied among government representatives, members of Congress, high-ranking bureaucrats and journalists. Politicians and their advisers are nowadays deeply integrated in networks.⁴⁵ The distinction between experts and advocates is thin which endangers the academic standards of policy innovation. "If trusted research and analysis is not available the foundation of policy decision becomes money, interests and lobbyists".⁴⁶ During the twentieth century, research was increasingly considered in ideological terms and distribution to the public than by its value-neutral nature.⁴⁷ The thesis thus looks at evolving perspectives and policy debates in the substantive areas of domestic economics, political institutions and democratic practices and to the elite regroupment of neoconservatives against liberals with a concern on the polarisation of American politics and its implications for the American democracy. Even those think tanks that by their mission sought to maintain a balance or neutrality in their research were regularly perceived by policy makers and funders as ideologically aligned in some way.

⁴³ Abelson, Donald E: Think Tanks in the United States. In: Stone, Diane/ Denham, Andrew/ Garnett, Mark (eds.): *Think Tanks Across Nations. A Comparative Approach*. Manchester, Manchester University Press 1998, pp. 107 – 126, (p. 113).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 124.

⁴⁵ Abelson, Donald E. "Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical View." *U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda: An Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State*, 7 (3), November 2002: 9-12.

⁴⁶ Rich, Andrew: *Think Tanks, Public Policy and the Politics of Expertise*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 214 -215.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-658-02934-0>

Think Tanks

The Brain Trusts of US Foreign Policy

Arin, K.Y.

2014, VIII, 95 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-02934-0