

Experts and Advocates: Think Tanks in the States

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Between 1980 and 2000, the number of think tanks based in the states more than doubled, with 170 think tanks spread across forty-two states by the beginning of the new century. In greater numbers than before, think tanks have become active and visible actors in state policymaking debates, mirroring developments at the national level (Rich 1999). And yet the characteristics and approaches of state-based think tanks vary substantially, even more than at the national level. Historically, think tanks produced rigorous policy research among decision-makers; they were distinguished from interest groups by their research focus, 501(c)3 tax-exempt status, and the absence of an individual or organizational membership or constituency directly represented by their activities. Many state-based think tanks conform to this historical model and seek to be neutral or balanced in their approach, aiming to produce original, applied research. But an increasing number are identifiably ideological, representing clear points of view if not obvious interests, and are principally concerned with marketing existing expertise rather than producing new policy relevant work.

I examine these developments in this paper and consider their implications for state policymaking. At first appearance, the growth in number of state think tanks fulfills the hopes of those who believe that more experts might make state policymaking better informed and more thoughtful. From the work of Harold Lasswell (1951) to that of John Kingdon (1995), experts have been portrayed as contributing to a more informed climate of ideas for policymaking; their proliferation should make policymaking more rational. Instead, as my analysis illustrates, the quite real ideological proclivities of many new think tanks has contributed to an environment in which think tanks are often little different from advocacy organizations, promoting points of view and preordained policy prescriptions. The growth among think tanks has contributed to a blurring of the boundaries between experts and advocates in state policymaking.

The paper begins with a descriptive analysis of the contemporary population of state-based think tanks: their numbers, ideologies, and resources. I consider what accounts for their changing profile as their numbers grow, especially the substantial ideological asymmetry with conservative organizations greatly outnumbering liberal ones. I then develop a framework for analyzing the roles and influence of think tanks in state policymaking. To enumerate features of the framework, I consider the media visibility of think tanks in California, the largest state and the one with the greatest number of state-based think tanks. I examine how think tanks and policy experts generally might be influential in policymaking and why, while in far greater numbers than before, think tanks may not be especially influential in state policy debates; at least their policy influence may not match their numbers. I argue that the growth and transformation among state think tanks largely reflects a shift in resources and motivations by funders and policy entrepreneurs and an organized effort to diffuse an organizational innovation across states.

The limitations in the influence of state think tanks reflects an inconsistency in the nature and extent of their efforts and the competition state think tanks face from other types of policy experts and advocates in state policymaking, especially as many of their own efforts come to better resemble the profile of advocates than experts.

Think Tanks as Evolving Political Actors

The first think tanks emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, as part of the Progressive Era program to replace political patronage with a more reasoned and objective public administration. Early think tanks formed at the initiative of businessmen who believed that the burgeoning social sciences could provide solutions to accumulating social and political problems (Critchlow 1985). The New York Bureau of Municipal Research was among the most prominent of the first group of think tanks formed in cities around the country “to advance a valid general science of administration that could be applied anywhere” (Smith 1991, 49). Many of the municipal agencies folded after a couple of decades, but they served as models for the first national think tanks. The Twentieth Century Fund, National Bureau of Economic Research, and Institute of Government Research, forerunner of the Brookings Institution, formed in the 1910s to produce policy relevant research for national decision-makers.

Between the 1910s and the mid-1960s, several dozen additional think tanks formed with similar missions to produce policy-relevant expertise generally based on rigorous, original research. By 1970, of approximately seventy active think tanks, sixty directed their efforts at national policy debates (although they were not all based in Washington, D.C.) while only ten were engaged in state and local issues. Most of these think tanks, both state and nationally-focused, had in common a staff of academically-trained researchers and an interest in maintaining a relatively low public profile. The first think tanks were generally funded by large private foundations, especially the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, or by the federal government, which after World War Two heavily supported evaluation research (Rich and Weaver 1999).

Beginning in 1970, the ranks of Washington, D.C.-based think tanks began to grow rapidly, quadrupling by the mid-1990s to just more than 120 organizations. In the same period, the number of think tanks based in the states began to explode as well. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of state-based think tanks grew almost five-fold, reaching 170 organizations by the end of the twentieth century.¹ However, only eighty-eight of these 170 state-based organizations actually had a research agenda focused on state policy issues. As Table 1 illustrates, sixty-nine of the state-based think tanks were focused exclusively on either national policy debates or what might be called “general public education” on issues not considered directly by state policymakers. Another thirteen think tanks were focused only on local and municipal policy

¹ The list of think tanks was compiled by combining references from three think tank directories (Hellebust 1996, Hollings 1993, Kitfield, 1995), five books (McGann and Weaver 2000, McGann 1995, Peschek 1987, Smith 1991, Stone 1996), several scholarly articles (Abelson 1996, Chisolm 1990), the Internet, and scores of newspaper and magazine stories. The list includes think tanks formed through the end of the 1990s. Until recently, there has been little evidence of think tanks opening and closing between 1960 and 2000. As a result, it is likely that most of the increase in organizational numbers is real and not simply an artifact of organizational replacement over time (Herzog 1963, Dickson 1971).

issues. Still, the eighty-eight organizations intent on state issues by 2000 represented a remarkable increase over the ten that existed in 1970.

Among these eighty-eight think tanks, there was substantial variation. Most notably, by 2000, think tanks that represented an identifiable point of view outnumbered think tanks that sought to remain balanced or objective by more than two to one. Among the more ideological think tanks, organizations that reflected broadly conservative values outnumbered those with broadly liberal orientations by more than three to one. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern by which state-focused think tanks formed between 1970 and 2000 by ideology.

[Table 1 here.]

[Figure 1 here.]

It was in the mid-1980s that conservative think tanks began to emerge at a rate that greatly out-paced counterparts of liberal, centrist, or no identifiable ideology. Between 1985 and 1995, new state-focused, conservative think tanks emerged at an overall rate of 3.5 each year. By comparison, state-focused think tanks of no identifiable ideology emerged at a rate of 1.3 each year, and liberal organizations at a rate of only 0.9 each year through the ten year period. Organizations are coded for ideology based on assessments of their self-portrayals in mission statements.²

By 2000, fifty of the eighty-eight state-focused think tanks represented a conservative point of view.³ Thirty-nine of these fifty were focused exclusively on state-level policymaking, while the other eleven also had some interest in either national or local issues. The result was

² Coding judgments were made based on key words in the mission statements and/or in introductory statements in the 1999 or 2000 annual reports or websites of the 170 state-based think tanks. Conservative organizations are coded as such based on the key words like “limited government” and “free market system” (in the context of demonstrating an interest and concern for each). Liberal organizations are coded as such based on key words related to concerns such as “poor and/or low-income people,” “wage stagnation,” “environmental justice,” and “progressivism.” Think tanks are coded as “centrist or of no identifiable ideology” if they fit neither ideological cluster or code into both categories. While judgments about organizational ideology are difficult to make based on the statements and publications of think tanks, particularly because think tanks are tax exempt nonprofits prohibited from most partisan activity, it is important to note that this coding procedure for *portrayed* ideology produced results highly correlated with two additional measures of the *perceived* ideologies of think tanks. Coding for a group of 35 think tanks correlated at a remarkably high 0.81 with a scaling of these same organizations by journalists and congressional staff with regard to perceived ideologies. And the codings correlated at an even higher 0.93 with the ideological labeling of 42 think tanks in newspaper stories between 1991 and 1995.

³ There are admittedly important additional distinctions that could be drawn within this categories. One considerable difference is between organizations that might reflect libertarian or conservative economic ideas and those representing the ideals of social and cultural conservatives. By my coding scheme, this distinction might be thought of as between the 41 organizations coded as conservative because of expressed interest in limited government and/or concerns for promoting free markets and the eight think tanks coded as conservative because of stated desires to promote religious expression or traditional family values. By this standard, economically conservative and libertarian think tanks outnumber socially conservative think tanks by a ratio of more than four to one. Another two think tanks coded as conservative state concern for matters that match coding criteria for both economic and social conservatives. In the end, distinctions within the broad ideological clusters are difficult to make with a high degree of certainty, so I keep my analysis at the level of only the three broad categories, which in themselves illustrate an unequal distribution of think tanks by ideology.

conservative think tanks focused exclusively on state-level policymaking in thirty-one states along with Washington, D.C.⁴ By contrast, only twenty-four of the state-focused think tanks were centrist or of no identifiable ideology, and only fourteen were liberal. Of the fourteen liberal organizations, only eight were focused exclusively on state policymaking, operating in seven states and Washington, D.C.⁵ What these numbers suggest is that liberal think tanks and think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology were not just substantially outnumbered by conservative organizations, but that in half of the states a conservative think tank was operating without any liberal counterpart, and in twenty-six states a conservative think tank was operating with no counterpart of centrist or no identifiable ideology. By contrast, liberal think tanks operated without conservative counterparts in only two states – Maine and New Mexico – and think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology existed without a conservative counterpart in only four states – Alaska, Kentucky, Louisiana, and North Dakota.

The asymmetry among state-focused think tanks extends as well to their resources. In 1998, conservative state-focused think tanks were on average twenty percent larger than their liberal counterparts. The average conservative state-focused think tank had a 1998 budget of \$993,000; the average liberal think tank had a budget of only \$830,000. The amount of total resources reported for think tanks in the centrist or no identifiable ideology category is distorted by the budget of one organization, the RAND Corporation, which had a 1998 budget of almost \$125 million, consumes 68 percent of the total resources in that group, and principally works on contract for the federal government. Among the rest of the centrist or no identifiable ideology think tanks, the average budget was \$2.5 million. Aggregate budget data for each category of organizations in 1998 are included in Table 1.

One additional clarification about the population of state-focused think tanks may help illustrate the variation in what it means for a think tank to represent an ideology or point of view. In Table 2, the state-focused think tanks are grouped by the breadth of their research missions. The organizations are grouped by whether they produce or promote research relevant to one policy area (e.g., county development, education reform), two or three policy areas, or something closer to the full-range of issues that state policymakers face. More than four-fifths of conservative state-focused think tanks (82%) are full-service, in the sense that they provide attention to a variety of issues, often selecting which topics to highlight based on the immediate priorities of state policymakers. By contrast, only a little more than one-third of liberal think tanks (35.7%) are full-service, with the greatest number working on only two or three issues. Among think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology, a bit more than half are full-service (58.3%).

[Table 2 here.]

⁴ The nineteen states without a conservative think tank focused *exclusively* on state-level policy issues were Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Of these nineteen states, three are home to think tanks with a joint focus on state and local issues, most notably perhaps, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy based in Midland, Michigan, with a 1998 budget of nearly \$1.4 million.

⁵ Only Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin had state-focused liberal think tanks.

The consequences of the difference between think tanks that pursue one issue and those that are full-service is more than quantitative. Full-service ideological think tanks tend to have missions explicitly geared to advance a developed governing philosophy. The James Madison Institute in Tallahassee, Florida, for example, has as its mission to advance through all of its work “foundational ideas such as economic freedom, limited government, federalism, traditional values, the rule of law, individual liberty, and personal freedom.” For full-service think tanks, topics of research and, oftentimes, approaches to research projects reflect an organizational desire to promote policy objectives consistent with an overriding view of the role of government that transcends any particular issue. Single or multi-issue ideological think tanks, by contrast, tend to serve missions focused on specific concerns rather than over-riding philosophies. Among liberal state-focused think tanks, a great proportion of which are single or multi-issue focused, the greatest number are concerned either with working to promote a sustainable environment or a living wage. The Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, states its mission as “using law, science, and research to protect Minnesota’s natural resources, wildlife and the health of its people....At the heart of our mission is a reverence for nature and a fundamental commitment to sustain and enhance environmental quality for the benefit of future generations.” The mission is characterized in reference to a commitment to a sustainable environment rather than any broad-based philosophy of governing.

In contrast to ideological think tanks of all types, think tanks of no identifiable ideology, whether full-service or single or multi-issue, tend to be organized around research imperatives rather than preordained views about appropriate policy outcomes; the methods for and conclusions of research are decided by individual investigators rather than within organizational hierarchies. The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, for example, describes itself as, “an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to the goals of a better-informed public and more effective, accountable, and responsive government.” It describes its priorities as producing “reliable and objective research as a basis for analyzing public policy,” and it values “independence from partisan bias and political ideology.”

Why So Many New Think Tanks?

The general growth of state level think tanks and the expansion of their roles and visibility in the 1980s and 90s corresponds with devolution of responsibilities from the federal government (Conlan 1998), enhancement of state policymaking infrastructure (Rosenthal 1998, 49-84; Sabato 1983), and a general growth of lobbyists, interest groups, and other non-governmental actors in state capitals (Rosenthal 1993, Hrebendar and Thomas 1992). The emergence of so many new think tanks may be related to these general developments. But the disproportionate number of conservative think tanks requires special attention. The pattern of their growth appears to stem from a coordinated effort by national conservative networks and the availability of patrons and resources for eager conservative entrepreneur in the states.⁶

The Heritage Foundation was the first of the new breed of politically active conservative think tanks involved in national policymaking. Heritage was founded in 1973 by two former Capitol Hill staffers with initial support from the beer-magnate Joseph Coors. From the start, Heritage set out to more aggressively target Congress with expertise than previous think tanks

⁶ These variables are similar to those highlighted by Walker 1991.

and to design research priorities around the issues pending on the congressional agenda. Heritage was joined in its efforts in national policymaking in 1977 by the Cato Institute, which moved to Washington in 1979 after forming in San Francisco. It similarly devoted itself to achieving visibility and shifting the terms of debate among legislators. While focused on Capitol Hill, both Heritage and Cato also pursued a secondary strategy of shaping the terms of public debate over the long-term on a variety of issues. With the country just beginning to transition out of a Keynesian framework into one that more aggressively questioned the role of government, these more ideological and politicized think tanks often appealed to the public directly to popularize such radical ideas as Social Security privatization.

One strategy Heritage and Cato used to promote their ideas was to find local newspapers that would run their op-eds around the country. Another strategy was to support the formation of state-based think tanks with similar ideals, by identifying state-based policy entrepreneurs interested in starting organizations in different states and by providing them access to possible funders. Assisting the creation of state-focused conservative think tanks was an important priority for national conservative think tanks, which wanted an appropriate infrastructure to be in place once devolution succeeded. As illustrated in Table 3, of the thirty-nine state-focused conservative think tanks active in policymaking, all but three formed after 1978, the period after Cato and especially Heritage were well established. The Heartland Institute, formed in Chicago in 1984, and the Denver-based Independence Institute, founded in 1985, were two of the first to benefit from direct assistance from the Heritage Foundation. As Independence Institute founder John Andrews puts it, his organization “nursed at Heritage’s breasts,” while remaining “careful to remain Coloradan” (Edwards 1997, 90). The Heritage Foundation created a resource bank of conservative academics based around the country that Heartland, Independence, and other new conservative think tanks could draw upon for listings of scholars based in their states. The resource bank permitted the establishment of adjunct scholarly relationships for state think tanks, greatly reducing their costs of operation.

[Table 3 here.]

Even more, the Heritage Foundation, in particular, provided lists of potential funders to prospective state start-ups, so that they might have ready bases of in-state financial support. More than fifty percent of the Heritage Foundation’s budget comes from individuals around the country – more than 240,000 individuals in 1998. During the 1980s and 1990s, Heritage provided new conservative state-focused think tanks with lists of its in-state funders, and Heritage president Edwin Feulner often wrote “letters of introduction” to donors about new conservative state-focused organizations. With the state think tanks fulfilling a quite different – and much desired – niche in the policy process, Feulner’s generosity reflected a view that the think tank funding world was “far from a zero sum game” (Feulner Interview 1996). Cato occasionally provided similar support to state-based initiatives, although not often in as coordinated a fashion.

Heritage and Cato could afford to be generous in sharing potential funding sources with state think tanks in part because the range of potential sources for conservative policy organizations expanded in the 1970s. A new cadre of small ideological, private foundations became interested in providing the first start-up grants for state think tanks. The foundations wanted to use their resources to engage the “marketplace of ideas” where debates over the size

and direction of government were taking place (Hodgson 1996). The Fred C. Koch Foundation, Lilly Foundation, John M. Olin Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation and Sarah Mellon Scaife Foundation were among the major sources of start-up grants to conservative state-focused think tanks during the 1980s and 1990s (Callahan 1999). Of \$210 million in contributions made by twelve conservative foundations between 1992 and 1994, \$79.2 million went “to build and strengthen a national infrastructure of think tanks and advocacy groups,” many at the state level (Covington 1997, 5). Foundations would provide the initial seed money for new think tanks, grants which would be followed by a range of individual contributions.

Beyond the availability of resources, with thirty-four conservative state think tanks already formed, in 1992 conservative state think tanks banded together to form the State Policy Network (SPN). The SPN grew out of informal conversations among leaders of the Illinois-based Heartland Institute, the South Carolina Policy Council, the Washington Institute for Policy Studies, and several other conservative think tanks in the late 1980s about the “best practices” of think tanks and how they might help one another survive and grow. The group was formalized in 1992 with support from the Roe Foundation and a staff of two, led by Byron Lamm, who had helped form the Indiana Policy Review. Based in Indiana, the network existed to serve and support “independent, state-based, market-oriented policy research organizations.” The network pooled the talents of existing state think tanks to provide technical assistance on how to organize and manage state organizations, especially new start-up think tanks. It served as a resource for intended policy entrepreneurs, especially in states without existing conservative organizations.

The network was reorganized in 2000 when Tracie Sharp, formerly at the Washington Institute for Policy Studies and the Cascade Policy Institute in Portland, Oregon, became president and moved the Network’s offices to San Francisco. It continues to bring state think tank leaders and researchers together quite frequently to exchange information on legislative battles in the states. The network increasingly provides assistance to new think tanks as they look for funding sources and staff.

With an explicit focus on think tanks, the State Policy Network complemented the existing efforts of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), formed in 1973 to serve as a network of policy information and ideas for state legislators predisposed toward principles of free markets and limited government. Based in Washington, D.C., ALEC had a membership by the end of the 1990s of 2,400 state legislators, almost thirty percent of state legislators nationwide. It generated reports and model legislation on a variety of issues through a process of task forces that included legislators and corporate members meeting several times a year. Leaders of ALEC had been involved in the discussions in the late 1980s and early 1990s that resulted in the State Policy Network. While not directly involved in assisting conservative think tanks itself, ALEC staff often coordinate their activities with state-based think tanks so that think tanks might produce research on topics that ALEC is promoting in model legislation. As Tracie Sharp, the State Policy Network’s president, puts it:

There are areas [SPN] can help them: for instance, hooking up the state think tank with particular ALEC legislators in that state and getting those two groups together to work some legislation. Mostly networking. And then ALEC has been good about involving us in their events and keeping SPN members informed as to what they are doing in the states. So it is a crucial alliance for the sake of the state

think tanks, primarily because, see, state think tanks will do the research and the policy work – writing the op-eds – but they can't carry it farther than that; they can't lobby...So they have to have a relationship with friendly legislators in their state who will basically carry the ball and then they can step back from that process. And that's where ALEC can provide the names and contacts of state legislators who may be helpful to different policy ideas coming out of the state think tanks (Sharp 2001).

Both in coordination with the SPN and ALEC and separate from them, the state think tanks that had emerged in the 1980s began, by the 1990s, to provide additional support to new start-up organizations by sharing research. The larger conservative state organizations produced reports that were available to and suitable for other state think tanks after little more than a search and replace to correct the state's name in the document. This kind of sharing allowed new organizations to form with little funding and support – sometimes without any full-time personnel – and achieve a level of visibility that would otherwise have been impossible. The Yankee Institute in Hartford, Connecticut, for example, operated through the 1990s with a budget of less than \$40,000, and no full-time staff, but it achieved substantial visibility in part by repackaging research from other states and marketing it to Connecticut legislators and journalists (Cohen Interview 2000).

Non-conservative think tanks have little that comes close to matching the coordination by conservative organizations. In 1993, at the initiative of the Washington-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the Ford Foundation joined with the Charles Stuart Mott Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to create a network of organizations devoted to state budget and tax analysis with an emphasis on issues affecting low and middle income Americans. The network, known as the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI), includes twelve organizations, each in a different state, that received several two-year \$200,000 grants through the 1990s (Paget 1997). While a network for both financial and technical assistance, the SFAI is substantially different from the conservative SPN. All but two of the twelve grantees were already existing organizations; the grants simply enabled them to extend or enhance their research focus. More than half of the grantees were not think tanks. Rather, six were public interest advocacy organizations, one a university-affiliated research institute, and one a public interest law firm (Lav Interview 2000). Moreover, the initiative was not open to organizations not receiving grant support from SFAI, although the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities coordinates an annual conference for interested state-level fiscal analysts and provides limited technical assistance to non-networked but like-minded state organizations. With the constraints put on it by the foundations, SFAI provides little hope to new start-ups as a potential source of funding the way conservative national think tanks and conservative foundations do. Moreover, the focus of the initiative was on a specific set of research concerns rather than organization-building. The creation of a sustaining organizational infrastructure was less a priority than the immediate generation of certain types of expertise.

The number of new state-focused think tanks, conservative and otherwise, began to level off after 1995. With little more than one or two organizations in most states – and still none in eight states – there is little evidence that state policymaking environments have been fully saturated with state think tanks, reaching anything like a maximum capacity. But then there is little evidence that state think tanks emerged in the first place in reaction to external demands

from policymakers. Their modern growth was much more related to the new availability of resources for think tanks, especially conservative organizations, and the existence of policy entrepreneurs willing to champion them. The budgets of state think tanks generally grew through the 1990s, but the end of the decade also showed the first significant signs of organizational mortality among state think tanks, especially liberal ones, as at least ten think tanks begun in the 1980s or early 1990s, many liberal, closed their doors between 1997 and 2000.

The Aspirations and Strategies of State-focused Think Tanks

The variation in the characteristics of the expanded ranks of state think tanks is reflected in a marked diversity in their strategies for seeking policy influence. The diversity of strategic behaviors represented among state think tanks is itself a reflection of – and of consequence for – three common core aspirations among these organizations. Think tanks pursue a combination of five types of strategic behavior to satisfy three core aspirations. The aspirations are:

- (1) the desire to establish, sustain, and grow sources of financial support for their organization,
- (2) the desire to establish a recognized, visible, and credible organizational niche in the policymaking world, whereby the organization becomes a sought-after source of information in certain policy areas, and
- (3) the desire to influence the outcomes of particular, discreet policy decisions.

These aspirations are roughly similar to the internal and external tasks Gray and Lowery (1996) describe for interest groups, and they are inter-related in the sense that strategic behaviors that might enhance or detract from achieving one aspiration may have consequences – usually similar consequences – for achieving the others. That said, state think tanks may engage in different conduct depending upon which organizational aspiration is a priority; different types of behavior – in the case of think tanks, different types of research – may serve to satisfy the three aspirations in ways that vary. Recognition that think tanks must aspire to achieve more than just the third aspiration – direct policy influence – helps to provide a context for appreciating the range of behaviors that think tanks pursue, some of which are more oriented toward helping think tanks secure resources and establish an issue niche than achieving direct influence.

The types of research think tanks produce and promote and the ways that the work of think tanks is useful in policymaking fall into five basic categories:

1. *Foundational research and education.* Think tanks may produce and promote research intended to influence the initial judgments of future or present policymakers and journalists about issues. Toward this goal, think tanks may put forth basic research intended for college and graduate students. In addition, they may construct research products that provide a guide to decision-makers, journalists, or the public on emerging or soon-to-emerge problems or issues. For example, they might collaborate on a PBS special about education reform in Illinois, or they might produce a book about competing proposals for reforming funding for public education in Texas. The point of this category of products is to shape how people understand policy issues, often well before they are called upon to make decisions or report about them. It serves organizational aspirations one and two more directly than aspiration three. That is, it creates visibility for the

organization with potential funders and in ways that establish its credentials on certain issues, but this type of research does not typically result in direct or at least immediate policy influence.

2. *Transformative research.* Think tanks may produce and promote research intended to refocus public and policymaker attention on an issue and reshape views about it. Toward this goal, think tanks might release research that encourages a new or alternative way of understanding a topic. For example, a think tank might receive a study about the long-term benefits of Social Security privatization. These products seek to transform public and policymakers' perceptions of problems and issues and encourage the elevation of issues in policy debate. These types of products serve all three organizational aspirations but do more for aspirations one and three than aspiration two. A think tank "campaign" to shift thinking on a particular issue can attract financial support from those who agree, and it can have a direct effect on at least the direction of policy debate. It may do less for establishing broad-based credibility in an issue niche, especially if the point of view taken on the issue is outside the mainstream.
3. *Evaluative research.* Think tanks may produce and promote research intended to advance basic knowledge about government programs and policy issues among policy specialists. Toward this goal, think tanks might produce program evaluations that assist program administrators and that contribute to whatever technical consensus might emerge among other researchers and policy specialists. Some think tanks, for example, have been heavily involved in evaluation of the TANF program in certain states. This type of work is more useful for achieving aspiration three and two than one; evaluation research can result in direct policy influence and organizational credibility, at least among other researchers, without achieving a substantial public profile. However, think tanks that produce evaluative research are often producing research for the same government agencies that fund them through contracts, so this type of work can serve aspiration one – securing financial support – as well.
4. *Advocacy research.* Think tanks may produce and promote research intended to support the efforts of like-minded policymakers in passing legislation or regulations. Toward this goal, think tanks might provide accessible, timely summaries of evidence and arguments that support a point of view on pending policy decisions. A think tank might produce, for example, a short issue brief about the risk for small business growth of new environmental legislation just before a vote on the bill. These products serve as ammunition in policy battles and satisfy aspiration one better than two or three. The products result in visibility for an organization with funders at a time when an issue is already receiving attention. However, while it is related to pending policy debates, this work often has little substantive influence on decisions made. The substance of policy decisions is usually already worked out by the time this kind of research surfaces. Advocacy research does not usually contribute to an organization's credibility within an issue niche unless the advocacy research represents the culmination of other types of research on the same topic. But even in that case, it is the previous research that establishes an organization's credentials more than the advocacy product.

5. *Technical assistance.* Finally, think tanks might produce and promote research that serves as technical assistance to policymakers. Toward this goal, think tanks develop specialized knowledge about the details of government programs and policies, and they make themselves available to offer technical suggestions to policymakers. A think tank, for example, may be able to clarify how a proposed change in welfare programs will affect the disabled elderly in Wisconsin, technical assistance that makes the organization valuable in final decisions on policy change (corresponding with aspiration three). Success in this area often reflects the establishment of an organizational reputation that might be a realization of aspiration two. This kind of research often fails, however, to receive the publicity that would make it valuable in pursuing aspiration one, financial support, especially from non-governmental sources.

The range of behaviors by think tanks illustrates that there is no single way for think tanks to achieve all three organizational aspirations and no single way to assess their success in state policymaking. My focus in the framework is on enumerating the different types of research that think tanks produce. The differences between the categories imply more than variation in the nature of the research, however. The five categories suggest variation as well in (1) the timing of research products, whether during agenda-setting when new approaches to issues are being evaluated or during final stages of policy enactment when policymakers' opinions are generally formed; (2) the intended audience for products, whether the public, elected policymakers, journalists, or other policy professionals; and (3) the intended effect of research, whether to shape broad-based opinions or influence specific narrow provisions in proposed legislation or regulation. As this last point implies, products initially produced as transformative research might be adapted and repackaged to serve as advocacy research. Most think tanks are active in at least two types of behavior outlined here and some in three or four of them.

The framework provides a useful context for evaluating state think tanks. For other portions of the project, I have collected a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to assess the records of think tanks and other sources of expertise in four states: California, Connecticut, New York, and North Carolina. To assess the role of think tanks and policy experts in shaping initial judgements about policy issues (foundational research and education), I examine the volume and visibility of think tanks in academically-oriented publications. To assess the efforts of think tanks that are associated with refocusing policymakers' attention on policy debates and reshaping their views on issues (transformative research), I analyze newspaper op-eds and commentaries by think tank staff and the volume of their repeated publication on similar subjects (an indication of their persistence on particular issues). To assess the efforts of think tanks to advance basic policy-specific knowledge (evaluative research), I examine the volume and visibility of evaluation research produced by think tanks, either on contract with the government or with foundations, and I consider the extent to which evaluation research is discussed and factored into specific policy debates. To assess efforts associated with providing support for policymakers' efforts (advocacy research), I evaluate the volume of personal contact and correspondence between think tank staff and policymakers and the extent to which think tank products are timed and packaged to suit the needs of policymakers and journalists. Finally, to assess the efforts of think tanks to provide technical advice in policy debates (technical assistance), I similarly evaluate the volume of personal contact and correspondence between think tanks staff and policymakers. I examine whether technical recommendations from think tanks are included in policy proposals.

Some of the most useful findings from the research come from in-depth interviews with those at think tanks and, especially, those who are consumers of their products. With a recognition of the diversity of audiences for think tank products, I have conducted interviews with not only policymakers and journalists but also with other researchers, interest group officials, bureaucrats, and foundation officers. Findings from this research will be reported in future work. For the remainder of this paper, I turn to an analysis of the media visibility of California think tanks, which provides important early indications of the connections between the ideologies of think tanks and the variety of their behaviors.

Think Tank Visibility in California

Achieving media visibility has become an important goal of think tanks in efforts to satisfy all three organizational aspirations. Visibility is a measure of organizational health, used by potential funders in deciding whether to provide support. Media visibility can be a public indication that organizations are succeeding in establishing themselves as credible actors within different policy niches. And media visibility can be a tool for attracting the attention and influencing the opinions of policymakers in particular issue debates.⁷ Media visibility is therefore an end goal for many think tanks.

Media visibility can be a means for think tanks as well, as they seek policy influence, and it is not equally valuable to all organizations. The types of media attention that is both desired and obtained by think tanks can vary based on their organizational missions and characteristics. The rest of this analysis has two aims. The first is to report the nature and extent of media attention to think tanks in California. The second is to use the analysis of media visibility in California to begin to identify patterns of behavior and influence among think tanks generally. With think tanks more numerous and diverse in contemporary state policymaking, how do their characteristics match up to different behaviors for producing and promoting research?

I examine the media visibility of California think tanks and other sources of policy expertise for two years, 1998 and 1999, in three newspapers, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Sacramento Bee*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*. California has more think tanks than any other state – twenty-six organizations – and hosts many more research-based foundations and policy-oriented university-based research institutes than most states. The number and diversity of sources of policy information in the state make it a good place to start in assessing linkages between the characteristics of think tanks and their behavior and influence in policymaking.

Existing work suggests that think tanks more successful at achieving the second organizational aspiration – establishing respect and credibility within one or more policy niches – should receive greater overall visibility, especially if the areas of their policy expertise are already receiving attention by the news media (Rich 2001, Rich and Weaver 2000). Weiss finds that sources that are well known and respected by journalists have an advantage in gaining news coverage (Weiss 1988, 51). Journalists also like sources that are close at hand (Graber 1993, 112). Established think tanks that maintain broad-based credibility on a range of issues should therefore have a particular advantage in achieving media attention. I examine the extent and the

⁷ While not actually influence, it is surprising how often media influence is thought of as “influence” when mentioned in interviews of policymakers and journalists.

nature of media visibility of think tanks in California to determine whether there are any links between the volume and content of visibility of think tanks and their characteristics, especially their ideological differences.

To assess the nature of think tank visibility in California, references to think tanks were coded into five categories in relation to whether they referred to: 1) articles written by think tank personnel (usually op-eds), 2) the findings of studies produced by think tanks, 3) substantive or political commentary by the “experts” at think tanks in news stories, 4) events held at think tanks but not necessarily involving think tank staff, or 5) some other topic (e.g., obituaries and wedding announcements). The “other” category, which includes sixteen percent of all citations to think tanks in my sample (247 of 1507 references), seeks to capture all references to think tanks that are not expressions of the knowledge or expertise of think tanks or related to their research missions.

In addition to coding references to the twenty-six think tanks, I coded references to three legislative research bureaus in state government (the California Research Bureau, the Legislative Analyst’s Office, and the Senate Office of Research), two private policy foundations (the California Higher Education Policy Center and the California Wellness Foundation), and four state-focused research institutes based at universities in California (Center for California Studies at Cal State Sacramento, Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley, Pat Brown Institute at Cal State Los Angeles, Tomas Rivera Policy Institute at Claremont Graduate University). Coding references to these additional sources of policy research enables comparisons to assess how popular think tanks are overall vis-à-vis alternatives as a source of policy information, at least with journalists.

Table 4 lists the twenty-six think tanks in California, along with some information about each. The second and third columns from the right indicate the total number of citations to each organization as well as the number of citations in proportion to the organization’s budgets (number of citations per year per \$1 million in budget resources). The table illustrates that while some of the largest organizations achieve the greatest overall volume of media visibility, in many cases they actually receive relatively modest coverage in proportion to their size. The RAND Corporation, for example, receives the greatest number of media citations in California newspapers in 1998 and 1999, but once its visibility is adjusted for the organization’s budget size, it received only 2.19 per million dollars spent each year. The paucity of visibility for RAND is actually an expected result since it specializes in evaluation research for the federal government. With most of its work produced on contract with the federal government, it has a ready made national audience and fewer incentives to seek media visibility for research, especially in California.

[Table 4 here.]

Overall, the table suggests that the think tanks with the biggest “bang for their buck” when it comes to newspaper visibility in California include the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association (SPUR), which is a small liberal organization focused on San Francisco planning issues (61 citations per year for every \$1 million in budget resources). SPUR received all but one of its citations in 1998 and 1999 in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The think tanks most “efficient” at achieving media visibility also include the California Budget Project,

which is a small liberal organization based in Sacramento and focused on state-budget issues affecting those with low and middle incomes (47 citations/\$1 million), the Capital Resource Institute, a conservative family values think tanks more prone to advocacy than research (31 citations/\$1 million), and the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), a relatively large, rigorous San Francisco-based think tank supported by an endowment from William Hewlett (14 citations/\$1 million).

The cumulative visibility counts are deceiving insofar as they include some references to organizations that are non-substantive and unrelated to their research or policy role. “Other” articles have been removed for the results presented in the far right column in Table 4; this column indicates the amount of substantive media visibility California think tanks receive each year in all three newspapers for every million dollars in budget resources. The same four think tanks receive the most efficient media visibility, but the number of articles for every \$1 million in budget resources is substantially reduced for two of the organizations – SPUR and the Capital Resource Institute. Twenty-two of the fifty references to SPUR were non-substantive or non-research related.⁸ Six of the twenty-two references to the Capital Resource Institute were “other” than substantive references.

The mixed ideologies of these four think tanks suggest no immediate conclusion with regard to how ideology affects volume of attention in newspapers. The references to SPUR are a bit of an outlier since all but one is in only one of the newspapers, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which is based in the city where SPUR conducts all of its work. The other three organizations most efficient at gaining visibility are state-focused, and their coverage is distributed across the three newspapers, although generally greater in the *Sacramento Bee* and, in the case of PPIC, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, than the *Los Angeles Times*. These results suggest that perhaps these three think tanks have particular credibility within a policy niche, and, in fact, the consistent nature of the topics of stories in which they generate coverage suggests some validity in my original hypothesis. More than half of references to PPIC are in stories reporting results from their statewide polls. More than half of references to the Capital Resource Institute are in stories that cite its consistent opposition to gay and abortion rights and its promotion of “traditional family values.” And more than half of references to the California Budget Project are in stories about the consequences of proposed changes to the state budget for poor and middle-income Californians. Each of the three think tanks appear to have established a policy niche, at least with print journalists, for which they are a consistent, seemingly legitimate source of information. Other California think tanks may either be less concerned with media visibility or less recognized as authorities within a policy niche.

If ideology does not appear a clear indicator of differences in volume of media visibility for think tanks, it is far more relevant to variation in the nature of citations to think tanks. Table 5 reports how California think tanks were cited in California newspapers, aggregated by organizational ideologies. Results are also presented for the legislative research bureaus, private research foundations, and university-based research institutes in California. Results are reported in two forms in Table 5a and 5b. Table 5a includes results for all twenty-six think tanks based in California. Table 5b is limited to only those think tanks focused in some way on state policy

⁸ Almost half of SPUR’s “other” references are to its role in a coalition to reform Muni, the San Francisco transit system, in 1999.

issues. Since the analysis is ultimately focused on how think tanks and policy experts affect state policymaking, my discussion focuses on the findings in Table 5b. Once think tanks that are not focused on state policymaking are removed from the analysis, I am left with only two liberal think tanks, three conservative think tanks, and two think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology. In terms of overall volume of attention, the two think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology receive more overall citations than the five conservative and liberal think tanks combined. Of the 175 citations to these two organizations in 1998 and 1999, 152 of them are to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). So PPIC alone receives more media attention than all other state-focused think tanks in California combined.

As Table 5b also indicates, PPIC therefore receives more media attention than all five university-based research institutes included in the study. This finding and the generally high volume of media visibility for think tanks as opposed to foundations and university-based expertise generally suggest that, if nothing else, think tanks can be an efficient vehicle for gaining visibility for research. The combined resources devoted to all state-focused think tanks in California are less than those devoted to the university-based institutes, in particular, and yet the think tanks receive more than twice the media attention of university research institutes.

More importantly, there are substantial differences in the types of references think tanks in the different ideological categories receive. Almost three-quarters of the citations to the two think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology (71.4%) referred to results from their studies. Another 16 percent of references were to commentary by think tank staff. Conservative think tanks were even more likely to be cited for staff commentary (44.1%). Conservative think tanks were also frequently cited in articles authored by think tank staff, usually op-eds (28%). The liberal think tanks similarly frequently provide commentary when referenced in newspapers (39%), although liberal think tanks, like think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology, are most often cited for their research (46.3%).

[Table 5a and 5b here.]

Interestingly, each of the three ideological groupings of think tanks has results that closely match one of the groups of non-think tank experts included in the study. The results for the think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology most closely resemble those for the legislative research bureaus. These are agencies that work directly for state government and prepare research at their direction. Results for the liberal think tanks resemble those for the private research foundations, and results for the conservative think tanks resemble those for the university-based research institutes. The overall volume of citations to these non-think tank sources of expertise suggests that the role and influence of think tanks in state policymaking cannot be considered in a vacuum. While, as noted previously, think tanks can be efficient at generating media visibility, they have many competitors who, from the point of view of consumers of their work (e.g., journalists and policymakers), may produce work that serves similar purposes in state policymaking. If these competitors produce similar types of products, their work is also equally diverse as that coming from think tanks. These results suggest that the variation in characteristics of contemporary state-focused think tanks, especially differences in their ideologies, carries over to affect the nature of research they produce and their strategies for gaining influence, establishing an organizational niche, and winning financial support.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the end, these initial findings raise as many questions as they answer. Most notably, if there are systematic differences in how state think tanks are cited in newspapers, do these differences suggest that there is indeed a relationship between the ideologies of think tanks and the types of research they produce? This is a question for future research, but I begin to consider the possibility of this relationship as I conclude.

When it comes to assessing how the nature of coverage that think tanks receive relates to their ideologies and the types of research produced, one might hypothesize that think tanks engaged in foundational research and education should more frequently be a source of commentary for journalists on topics already receiving attention in the news. These organizations frame issues for public debate, often from multiple perspectives, and therefore they are useful sources of background and commentary for journalists. Think tanks that produce background research and represent a variety of points of view are well-equipped to explain issues to journalists and newspaper readers. Think tanks producing transformative research might also be a source of commentary in newspapers, although their commentary should be in support of a particular interpretation of policy issues. These think tanks should also be a frequent source of self-authored op-eds in newspapers, since they will be trying to promote alternative perspectives in newspapers. Think tanks active in producing advocacy research might strike a similar profile in newspapers, as both a source of commentary and a writer of op-eds. By contrast, those think tanks supplying evaluative research and technical assistance should be cited for their studies, since they tend to be less active in promoting ideas through commentary and op-eds.

If these hypotheses prove valid, my results for California suggest that think tanks that are centrist or of no identifiable ideology, which are most often cited for results of their research, might typically be engaged in evaluative research and technical assistance. With some attention to their commentary, these think tanks may produce foundational research and education as well. Conservative think tanks, which are most often cited for commentary and as authors of op-eds, might be most active in producing transformative and advocacy research. And liberal think tanks, which are most often cited for research and commentary, are perhaps engaged in advocacy, transformative, and foundational research.

These possibilities suggest quite plausible groupings for the products of think tanks. Think tanks that represent an ideological perspective are the most logical ones to be active in transformative and advocacy research, work that represents and seeks to advance a point of view or particular policy approach. Research that might be transformative during agenda-setting might become advocacy research as an issue moves toward policy enactment. Likewise, there is a logic to think tanks of centrist or no identifiable ideology being cited most frequently for evaluative research, technical assistance, and, to a lesser extent, foundational research. This work tends to be more rigorous, and its results less governed by an ideological bias or point of view. The liberal think tanks in California suggest a similar combination of strategic behaviors, operating as both commentators and sources of research. This combination is consistent with liberal think tanks serving as a source of both advocacy and transformative research as well as one for foundational research and education, a plausible combination, especially for a place like the California Budget Project, which produces both long-term assessments and short term advocacy-oriented issue briefs.

The relationship between the ideological characteristics of state think tanks and their strategic behaviors and research products requires additional investigation. Even if the interpretation I offer in relation to media visibility is correct, it needs to be extended to other venues think tanks use to achieve their core organizational aspirations of growing resources, credible policy niches, and policy influence. Moreover, the results raise additional questions about the internal organization of think tanks, sources of financial support, and differences in how, concretely, they format and produce research that puts it at an advantage (or not) with intended audiences.

My findings so far nevertheless raise cause for concern by those who might be under the impression that the proliferation of state-focused think tanks in the last two decades might have resulted in a greater volume of rigorous policy research available in state policymaking and for those inclined to believe that a greater number of policy experts active in state policymaking means that experts are more substantively influential. In fact, amid the proliferation of new think tanks in the states, new organizations have more often held commitments to identifiable ideologies than to producing balanced, neutral, question-driven research. If the types of media visibility that California think tanks generate is any indication, the emergence of more ideological think tanks means the production of research that is more often geared to changing or reinforcing its audiences' points of view than providing them new insights or technical help. If true, the products of think tanks become little different from those of interest groups and lobbyists, and in many respects, the substantive influence of think tanks is diminished. Once think tanks are competing with interest groups, they are at a disadvantage because think tanks represent no identifiable constituency; they lack the potential leverage at the disposal of interest groups, beyond that provided by their research. And the types of research my results imply ideological think tanks are producing – especially advocacy research – have limited substantive value in debates over policy enactment, once decision-makers have pretty well established their policy positions. The products of ideological, especially conservative think tanks – whose numbers have grown the most since 1980 – become far less useful in providing the substantive outlines or detailed components of new policies. If my initial findings are any indication, the growth among think tanks may have resulted in the blurring of boundaries between experts and advocates. Far from improving the quality of policy discourse, think tanks have all too often become organizations that turn experts into advocates and policy information into ammunition.

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