

The War of Ideas, Part II

by Andrew Rich

Assessed from any angle, conservative ideology appears to be dominating the policy agenda in the United States. Ideas about limited government, unfettered free markets, and strong families have become pervasive and influential in debates over everything from tax policy and business regulation to education reform and civil rights. Conservative ideology has been advanced by conservative politicians but, even more, by a conservative infrastructure of nonprofit organizations led by think tanks. During the past three decades, explicitly ideological and particularly conservative think tanks have exploded in number – in Washington and in state capitals around the country. These conservative think tanks have been a principal engine for conservative ideology. By 2005, they outnumbered liberal think tanks by almost two to one.

In the war of ideas, conservative think tanks have numerical superiority. They appear to use superior methods in organizing their efforts in the war of ideas as well, compared with liberals. In a Spring 2005 SSIR article, I argued that liberals are at a disadvantage in the war of ideas because mainstream and liberal foundations – those most likely to support progressive efforts in the war of ideas – are prone to support research over ideas. They “back policy research that is of interest to liberals. But these funders remain reluctant to make explicit financial commitment to the war of ideas, and they do relatively little to support the marketing of liberal ideas.”¹

I concluded that mainstream and progressive foundations might have more success in the war of ideas if they supported explicitly liberal think tanks, rather than focusing their resources primarily on think tanks that often go to great lengths to avoid being perceived as ideological – places like the Brookings Institution, Urban Institute, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. My new research suggests that even if foundations follow that advice, greater success in the war of ideas might still be difficult to achieve. The preference to support nonpartisan research rather than the promotion of ideas is pervasive not just among mainstream and progressive foundations; this preference dominates the ranks of identifiably liberal think tanks as well – the very think tanks that, in many cases, formed with explicit intentions to be counterweights to conservative institutions.

The results of a national survey of think tank leaders suggest that conservative and liberal think tanks don’t, in the end, just seek to advance different ideologies, but they organize think tanks and other advocacy efforts in ways that reflect these ideologies as well. That spells trouble for liberals. For conservatives, that ideology is one that values the power of ideas – and positions think tanks to be the infrastructure for advancing ideas, above all else. By contrast, even when they profess to be attracted to think tanks for the same reasons, the leaders of liberal think tanks are often preoccupied by deeply held

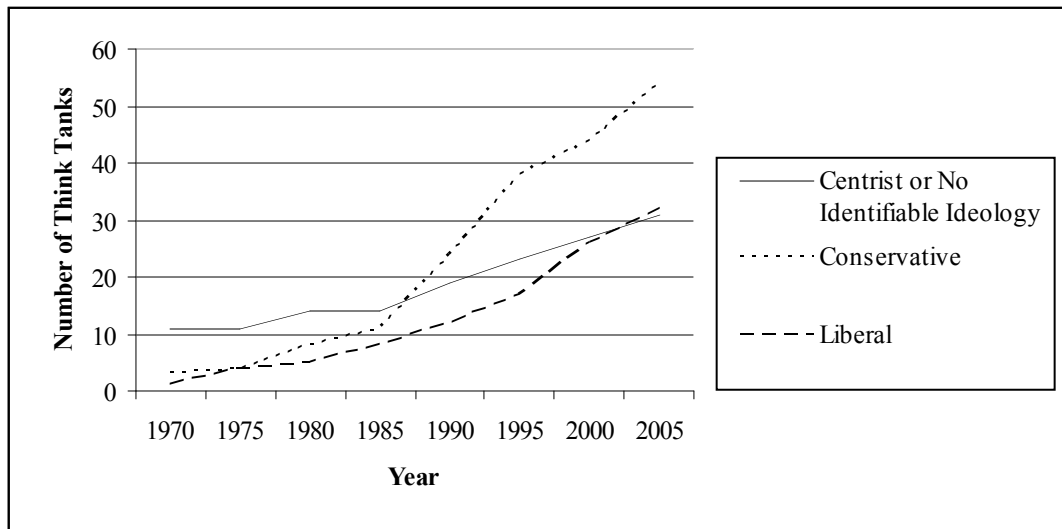
¹ Andrew Rich, “The War of Ideas: Why Mainstream and Liberal Foundations and the Think Tanks They Support are Losing in the War of Ideas in American Politics,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 3 (2005): 18-25, p. 18.

commitments to producing objective research, on the one hand, and to connecting their work to issue-based grassroots activism, on the other hand. These commitments are compatible with the tenets of liberal ideology, but they are far less helpful to fighting a war of ideas.

Think Tanks as an Infrastructure for Ideas

Between 1970 and 2005, the number of think tanks nationally quadrupled; state-based think tanks grew at an even faster pace, reaching 183 organizations.² Of these 183 state-based organizations, 117 of them had research agendas focused primarily on state policy issues, more than a ten-fold increase over the ten that existed in 1970. Among these 117 think tanks, conservative ideology dominates. By 2005, state think tanks that represented an identifiably conservative ideology outnumbered both think tanks that were liberal and think tanks that sought to remain balanced or objective by almost two to one. These numbers parallel trends among think tanks at the national level. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern by which state-focused think tanks formed between 1970 and 2005 by ideology.

Figure 1: Emergence of State Think Tanks by Ideology, 1970-2005



In July 2003, I administered a mail survey among leaders of 115 of the 117 state-based think tanks nationally; two of the organizations were formed after the survey was administered. The survey inquired about the histories, missions, and strategies of these organizations, beginning with questions about leader and staff backgrounds.³ In answer to

² See Andrew Rich, "Think Tanks and the War of Ideas: Organizing Ideology in American Politics," forthcoming.

³ I received seventy-eight responses, a 67.8% response rate, from think tanks that were broadly representative of the larger population of state think tanks with respect to ideology, along with geography and size. I received responses from thirty-four conservative think tanks, nineteen liberal think tanks, and twenty-five think tanks of no identifiable ideology.

the question, “What type of job did the first leader of your organization have immediately before forming or joining your organization?”, respondents had ten answer choices, plus the option of writing in another description of the founder’s background.⁴ Among conservative think tanks, a significant plurality – almost forty percent – of those who were the organizations’ first leaders came from the private sector; they were either former lobbyists or business executives (38.2%). By contrast, almost two thirds of those who formed liberal think tanks came out of state government or from the nonprofit advocacy community (63.1%).

These leadership differences seem to have bearing on decisions about how to organize operations and decision-making. The survey asked think tank leaders about the criteria they use when selecting or promoting full-time staff. Out of nine response options (along with an option to write in a response not listed), leaders of conservative think tanks most often named political or ideological orientation as the most important consideration when hiring staff; for liberals, ideology was far down the list.⁵ Almost three quarters of the leaders of conservative think tanks named political or ideological orientation as most or very important in making decisions about who to hire (73.6%). By contrast, less than half of the leaders of liberal think tanks named ideology as most or very important (42.2%). Among the other top priorities for the leaders of conservative think tanks were issue expertise (61.8%), media and public affairs experience (35.3%), and a record of publication (32.3%).

By contrast, in addition to being less concerned about political or ideological orientation, the leaders of liberal think tanks expressed less concern with media and public affairs experience (21.1%) and a record of publication (5.1%). Instead, liberals place a premium on advanced degrees (either policy degrees, 42.1%, or PhDs, 31.6%) and experience in government (36.9%), along with issue expertise (57.9%). Leaders of conservative think tanks show far less interest in advanced degrees (23.5% for policy degrees and 8.8% for PhDs) and with experience in government (20.5%).

These results about the hiring preferences of think tank leaders are consistent with who think tank leaders report that they actually employ. The survey asked the leaders of state think tanks to characterize where their full-time staff worked prior to joining the think tank. Almost three-quarters of conservative think tank leaders indicated that all or some staff came from the business community or private sector (73.5%). By contrast

⁴ The response choices were: (1) worked in politics (e.g., elected office, campaigns, party organization), (2) worked in state government (e.g., government office, agency, or department), (3) worked with a nonprofit advocacy group, (4) worked as an academic/college professor, (5) worked as a journalist, (6) worked in politics outside of the state, (7) worked on government outside of the state, (8) worked as a lobbyist, (9) worked in the private sector, (10) worked at another think tank.

⁵ The response choices for this question were: (1) specific issue expertise, (2) media/public affairs experience, (3) coherent/appropriate political or ideological orientation, (4) record of previous publication, (5) advanced policy degree (MA, MPA, MPP), (6) advanced research degree (PhD), (7) experience working in politics, (8) experience working in/around government, (9) academic experience.

liberal think tank staff came from the nonprofit advocacy community in almost the same proportion (63.2%).⁶

One more difference between survey responses from conservative and liberal think tanks is worth noting: how they rank the significance of different kinds of staff activities to their organizations. Respondents were asked, “How do you rate the importance of the following activities in relation to fulfilling your organization’s mission?” They were provided ten choices, along with the option to write in an additional response.⁷ Leaders of both conservative and liberal think tanks most often named advising policymakers and the news media about their research products as either most or very important to fulfilling their mission.⁸ But from there, differences quickly emerged.

The leaders of conservative think tanks were significantly more likely to name “advising legislators on immediately pending policy issues” and “shaping public opinion on policy issues” as high priorities compared with the leaders of liberal think tanks. Three-quarters of the leaders of conservative think tanks named advising legislators as most or very important (76.5%), whereas just more than half of liberal think tanks named that as important (57.9%). Likewise, three-quarters of the leaders of conservative think tanks named shaping public opinion as important (73.5%), while only half of the leaders of liberal think tanks report that as important (52.6%).

The leaders of liberal think tanks, by contrast, named informing nonprofit advocacy groups about their research as important at much higher rates than those at conservative think tanks. More than three-quarters of the leaders of liberal think tanks named the nonprofit advocacy community as very or most important (78.9%), whereas only one-fifth of the leaders of conservative groups named it as a priority (20.5%).

Differences in the Strategic Priorities of Think Tanks

Overall, these findings begin to illustrate important ways that ideology affects the organization of think tanks. The differences in their priorities with respect to staffing decisions offer perhaps the starkest contrast between conservative and liberal think tanks. Consistent with a view that ideas matter – and that differences in ideology are important – the leaders of conservative think tanks place substantial importance on the ideological

⁶ State government was the second most frequently named background for think tank staff by both conservative and liberal think tanks. And government was the most often named background characteristic raised by leaders of think tanks of no identifiable ideology.

⁷ The response options were (1) advising legislators on immediate pending policy issues, (2) advising legislative staff on immediately pending policy issues, (3) advising executive branch officials on immediately pending policy issues, (4) advising the news media about immediately pending policy issues, (5) informing the news media about research products, (6) informing nonprofit advocacy groups about your research products, (7) informing lobbyists and/or trade groups about your research products, (8) informing policymakers (legislators and executive branch) about your research products, (9) informing the policy research community (e.g., other think tanks, academics) about your research products, (10) shaping public opinion on policy issues.

⁸ 85.3% of leaders of conservative think tanks named this response as most or very important, and 79.0% of liberal think tanks did the same.

and political predilections of those they hire. Conservative think tanks are interested in hiring politically conservative people above all else.

Next in importance for conservative think tanks is that those that they hire be prepared to make a contribution to the war of ideas. Conservative think tank staff need to have an issue expertise; they need to have experience in media and public affairs. And staff should have a record of publication. The leaders of conservative think tanks were much more likely than their liberal counterparts to express a preference for staff who are ready to hit-the-ground-running in the public battles to shape the terms of American policy debate. Responses to the question about staff qualifications were wholly consistent with the view that conservatives see think tanks as idea promoters. This finding is supported by in-depth interviews with many national think tank presidents.

The legitimacy of this understanding of the role of think tanks among conservatives was also confirmed in a final survey question. Think tank leaders were asked to choose from among three descriptions of think tanks: as places for (1) public intellectuals, (2) policy researchers, or (3) issue activists. The majority of conservative think tank leaders (56.0%) selected the response that described think tanks as a place for “public intellectuals – for those with well-formed ideas about the role for government and talents in producing and organizing policy research about these ideas in ways that might inform policymaking.” For conservatives, think tanks are important as promoters of ideas; the research that takes place at think tanks is in the service of a broader ideological agenda.

By contrast, the leaders of liberal think tanks selected the description of think tanks as places for “public intellectual” – as places for those with well-formed ideas – least often among the three choices offered. Instead, they were split between those who described think tanks as “for policy researchers – for those with interest in the researchable dimensions of particular issue areas and talents in producing applied policy research that might inform policymaking” (31.6%), and those who saw think tanks as “for issue activists – for those with concerns about specific policies and populations and talents in producing research and organizing citizens in ways that might inform and affect policymaking” (36.8%). The leaders of liberal think tanks view their organizations first and foremost as research organizations – not as idea promoters. Yet these are the think tanks that one might assume are poised to do battle for the left in the war of ideas. Instead, the results on this and other questions in the survey reveal identifiably liberal think tanks as virtually indistinguishable from think tanks coded and confirmed as of no identifiable ideology.

The leaders of liberal think tanks are most concerned with hiring staff with issue expertise and with research/academic credentials, rather than staff with media experience or with records of popular publication. For the leaders of liberal think tanks, it is most important that the organization be able to produce credible, rigorous research rather than promote that research or fit it into a broader ideological project. Research is the product of think tanks, and its completion is the core purpose of the organization.

Further evidence of this last point is provided by how the leaders of liberal think tanks characterize the importance of different types of staff activities. The leaders of liberal think tanks consistently placed priority on informing specific audiences about their research products rather than on shaping the broader terms of policy debate. They describe informing policymakers, nonprofit advocacy groups, and the news media about their research products as most important to fulfilling their organization's mission.

The leaders of conservative think tanks also describe informing policymaking communities about their research products as important. But they place equal emphasis on shaping public opinion on policy issues (regardless of their research products) and advising legislators on immediately pending policy issues (again, regardless of research products). These findings suggest that conservative think tanks basically place much more importance on finding a receptive audience for their *ideas* – separate from their *research* – than do liberals.

When Ideology Impedes Organization

The findings from the survey suggest that many of the differences in how think tanks approach their missions are closely related to differences that come out of the ideologies they seek to promote. As a practical matter, this conclusion suggests a far bigger problem for liberals than for conservatives in the war of ideas in American politics. To the extent that this war is on-going and think tanks are important to it, conservatives have the advantage, first, because they have more think tanks that are better funded. And second, as these results suggest, because even where they exist and have resources, liberal think tanks are typically not organized to be effective counterweights to conservative organizations in the war of ideas.

Liberals approach think tanks from a century-long tradition of investing in the production of objective policy research. Since the creation of the social science disciplines during the Progressive Era, liberals have been committed to the view that research is essential to an informed policymaking process. Research may lead to ideas – but ideas that are pragmatic and well-reasoned, not value-laden. The tradition for research among liberals is one that “tends to minimize disagreement over political values, and at times seems to ignore underlying values if not wish them away altogether.”⁹

In this context, liberals are inclined to approach a war of ideas in American politics by, in some sense, denying its very legitimacy. Ideological battle is political nonsense; the results of rigorous, objective research can – and should – best inform the appropriate possibilities for government and society. Politics should not be about winners and losers so much as it should be about building consensus, and research can point the way toward that consensus. To view the role of research – and research organizations – in any other way would be inappropriate. It is the obligation of the disinterested expert to develop optimal policy-based solutions. The findings here lend support to this conclusion. These are attitudes pervasive not just among think tank leaders at the state

⁹ James A. Smith, “Think Tanks and the Politics of Ideas,” in *The Spread of Economic Ideas*, ed. by David C Colander and A.W. Coats. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

level, but among those who run national organizations as well. As the president of one national think tank consistently perceived as liberal put it to me:

I work very hard to maintain a posture of nonpartisanship and non-advocacy. If you look at an organization's agenda, you can form a view – without knowing anything about what they're doing or who they are. You look at the agenda and say, "Well, look, these people are working on income distribution, health insurance, welfare, public housing. They've got to be liberal Democrats. After all, who works on those things?" That's not so true here.... We do honest work. That is our charter – to do objective work, to put it out there, to try to get it in the hands of people who need it, when they need it. But not to push an agenda. Well, you might say that the work may lead to an agenda. That's true. But we're not an agenda organization. We don't think there is a political bias.¹⁰

Conservatives begin their thinking on these issues in a very different place. They begin from the perspective that ideas and values motivate – rather than result from – research. In their view, all research is ideological insofar as ideas or ideology at least inform the questions that so-called "neutral" researchers ask. There is no such thing as disinterested expertise or the disinterested expert. Instead, there are "permanent truths, transcending human experience, [that] must guide our political life."¹¹ These truths motivate research, and research is a means to a more important end: realizing the ideas that are a reflection of this core truth.

Conservatives believe at a fundamental level that ideas have power.¹² Ideas inform preferences and behavior far more than research. And ideas not only are – but *should be* – more powerful than expertise. One engages in (or supports) policy research for the same reasons one supports political advocacy: because both contribute to the larger causes of shifting the terms of debate in American policymaking and to amplifying the power of conservative ideas.

For conservatives, the war of ideas provides the rationale for creating think tanks. Think tanks are the engine for conservative ideas. And conservatives apply an entrepreneurial spirit to their organization with the view that in a war of ideas, conservative ideas need a machinery – an artillery – to promote and disseminate them from every angle possible. Conservative think tanks should operate across the full range of issue domains, and they should be poised to interject ideas into any issue debate that captures the attention of policymakers or the public.

Thanks to their alternative views about research, liberals have a much more difficult time reconciling the formation of research organizations with the promotion of ideas in American policymaking. Rather than approaching think tanks with a

¹⁰ Author interview, 2001.

¹¹ Smith 1989, 192.

¹² Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

commitment to advancing a particular worldview as their main priority, liberals view think tanks with a pragmatic eye, relying on them to produce research that might speak to the policy needs of different issue domains. As the president of one liberal think tank put it to me:

The important thing for us, and it's not true – and I don't say this purely out of a spirit of rivalry and competitiveness – but it's not true, for example, for the Heritage Foundation. They don't really care whether their numbers meet academic standards. For us, it's a question of survival. We know that we can't make it unless we continue to be credible to places with our numbers. So we try to be bold politically but we spend a lot of energy making sure our numbers are right.¹³

But in the survey – and in the country – liberals are actually split with respect to how they view the appropriate role of research and research organizations. If one group of liberals takes the approach just described – which I call a “pragmatic liberal” approach – another group comes at it from a very different direction. They are “progressive activists” (describing think tanks as “issue activists” in the think tank survey), and they reject the elitist proclivities of social science research organizations and the very notion that research can best reveal the appropriate directions for public policy.

An expert-based politics is problematic in their view, not because “progressive activists” embrace a politics of ideas over expertise (as conservatives do). Instead progressive activists reject the elitist, anti-democratic features of the liberal pragmatists – an approach where research reveals truth and the policy researcher knows best. Progressive activists prefer instead a politics that relies on “the people” – on grassroots mobilization and a mass base for political change. For progressive activists, any effort to turn research into advocacy requires grassroots popular mobilization. In order for research and ideas to have legitimacy, they must reflect the real preferences – or interests – of citizens, who are actively supportive of – and engaged in – their promotion.¹⁴

The progressive activist is closer than the pragmatic liberal to the entrepreneurial conservative's view of think tanks as primarily important because they might influence political change (rather than simply produce policy expertise for its own sake). But whereas *ideas* are the most powerful currency for conservatives, the *people* – organized as grassroots constituencies – are more important for progressive activists. And it is the *interests* of the people – rather than any set of ideas – that progressive activists seek to pursue, with their help and on their behalf. This attention to interests and to public mobilization is largely incompatible – or at least in tension – with the war of ideas in American politics and with the central role and purpose of think tanks in that war. Ideas are really not important to liberals – pragmatists or activists – in the ways that they are to conservatives. As a result, the translation of liberal ideas and ideology into the

¹³ Author Interview 2005.

¹⁴ For some discussion of this approach, see Deepak Bhargava and Rachel Gragg, “Winning by Losing Well.” *The American Prospect*, 3 July 2005.

organization of think tanks seems to have followed not only a different trajectory from that of conservatives, but also a far more difficult one.

The war of ideas may seem undesirable to some – particularly those who have trouble contending with a role for ideas in policymaking in the first place. Wars are rarely easy, and when they are fought over ideas, substance can sometimes seem secondary to story-telling. War implies a place for winners and losers in politics that those who prefer consensus building find uncomfortable. But liberals – and scholars – who might wish to dismiss the legitimacy of political ideas right along with the “war,” itself, would be making a mistake. As two avowedly liberal researchers recently concluded, “Most new programs and initiatives come from the right. The left has had little to do with setting the country’s agenda and seems unable to mount any sort of effective resistance to the conservative juggernaut.”¹⁵

In the wake of the 2004 election, foundations and individual donors have shown fresh interest in supporting new liberal think tanks.¹⁶ My research suggests that new support should be directed not just toward the straightforward development of more think tanks – but think tanks of a particular type. These think tanks need to adopt missions and reflect strategies at odds with what has been the typical approach for liberals. They should be focused on ideas over research and on building a movement to support those ideas over the long-term. To date, with only a few exceptions, as conservatives and liberals have pursued very different ideas about the role for government, they have also followed very different ideas of how best to promote these roles for government from think tanks. Liberals – and the leaders of liberal think tanks – might do well to appreciate the power of these ideas, both in policy debates and in the organization of their efforts to influence policy debates.

¹⁵ Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado, *No Mercy: How Conservative Think Tanks and Foundations Changed America’s Social Agenda* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) p. 4.

¹⁶ See, for example, Thomas B. Edsall, “Rich Liberals Vow to Fund Think Tanks,” *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2005, p. A1.