

Special Report

Investing in Ideas, Influencing Policy: A Guide to Think Tank Effectiveness



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FOREWORD



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Private philanthropy in the United States supports a wide range of nonprofit organizations, including those that provide a variety of direct human, faith-based, and educational services to individuals, families, and communities; those that foster academic and scientific research to expand knowledge; and those that focus on studying and advancing public policy. While some donors may choose to restrict their support to one type of charitable activity, many others use multiple tactics to accomplish their goals. It is not uncommon for donors to combine support for direct services with funding to promote new or changed public policy.

For example, health funders may support their local hospitals while also promoting actionable research to increase health care access and quality. Charter school advocates may make general operating support grants to one or more specific schools while also promoting regulatory changes to expand the number of charter schools allowed to operate in a particular school district.

Philanthropy Roundtable has consistently recognized the important role of public policy grantmaking in private philanthropy and has worked to educate donors committed to promoting liberty, opportunity, and personal responsibility on how to use public policy to move those values forward. Philanthropy Roundtable’s 2016 guidebook, [“Agenda Setting,”](#) educated readers on the broad sweep of public policy grantmaking from the 1830s through the early 21st century. And the 2022 policy primer, [“Policy Philanthropy and Its Key Role in Civil Society,”](#) explained that policy-focused nonprofits are indeed “charitable,” and defended the rights of individual donors and foundations to support them.

Our newest offering in this area, “Investing in Ideas, Influencing Policy: A Guide to Think Tank Effectiveness,” authored by senior fellow of Domestic Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, Howard Husock, is a welcome contribution to work on both philanthropic freedom and values-based

FOREWORD

giving. Utilizing decades of experience with public policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School, the Manhattan Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute, Husock educates donors on the different types of policy “think tanks” and dives deeply into the process used by autonomous and independent think tanks to move from research to action.

For public policy funders making both short- and long-term investments, this treatise offers invaluable insights into the various opportunities to move the needle – the “how” and “when” an influx of funds can have significant impact. Framing questions strategically is critical, as is the extensive research that follows. But the great ideas that emerge from research require wise communication and marketing to engage valuable allies and develop favorable opinions on a more widespread basis. And gauging when the political environment is ripe for change must allow for an unexpected opportunity or crisis.

For charitable donors considering public policy philanthropy and for donors seeking to evaluate policy grants they have already made, the following Special Report on think tanks is insightful and highly recommended reading. With careful consideration to the process outlined in this report, donors may direct think tank funding toward those with high impact.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As donors evaluate think tank investments, this paper proposes a series of features that distinguish independent autonomous public policy think tanks and their effectiveness in influencing public policy choices.¹ With careful consideration to the process outlined in this report, donors may direct think tank funding toward those with high impact.

It will discuss and exemplify the following stages of an effective think tank as follows:

1. Conceptualizing the “think tank question”

Including discussion of how a think tank project differs from purely academic research.

2. Promotion of research findings

Why think tanks seeking impact must maintain public communication arms and public-facing scholars.

3. Seizing the moment

Understanding when a window of policy opportunity has opened—whether for new or older findings—and acting on it. This can include legal action.

4. Engaging allies

Either actively working in coalitions or making supportive interest groups aware of findings at the appropriate time.

5. Impact and politics

Including the decision of if and when to compromise.

¹ While the examples of policy reform successes in this paper focus on the work of think tanks, it is important to note that these successes were often aided by the joint efforts of coalitions of nonprofit organizations.

ABOUT THINK TANKS

The independent research institutions known as “think tanks” can appear to be simply academic in character. Their research staff—often designated as fellows or scholars—examine questions of public policy like academic researchers. Think tank researchers, many with advanced post-graduate degrees, may apply sophisticated economic and statistical methodologies to analyze the impact of policy choices.

Notwithstanding overlap, on closer examination, think tanks differ in fundamental ways from universities. For think tanks, a key part of their work is to inform those in a position to decide public policy. As described in an international overview of more than 8,000 think tanks published by the [University of Pennsylvania](#): Think tanks “are public policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy.”

By this definition, clarifying the implications of policy choices may be viewed as the goal of a successful think tank. One might, for instance, view an intra-governmental institution like the US Congressional Budget Office in that light, through its work in providing estimates of the impact of proposed legislation on debt and deficit.

But not all think tanks define success and impact in terms of the simple provision of analyses. As the UPenn report points out, the universe of think tanks includes a variety of types, ranging from the government-sponsored to the corporate-affiliated.



INVESTING IN IDEAS, INFLUENCING POLICY:
A GUIDE TO THINK TANK EFFECTIVENESS



CATEGORIES OF THINK TANK AFFILIATIONS

AUTONOMOUS AND INDEPENDENT

Significant independence from any one interest group or donor, and autonomous in its operation and funding from government.

QUASI-INDEPENDENT

Autonomous from government but controlled by an interest group, donor or contracting agency that provides most of the funding and has significant influence over operations of the think tank.

GOVERNMENT-AFFILIATED

A part of the formal structure of government.

QUASI-GOVERNMENTAL

Funded exclusively by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of government.

UNIVERSITY-AFFILIATED

A policy research center at a university.

POLITICAL-PARTY AFFILIATED

Formally affiliated with a political party.

CORPORATE (FOR-PROFIT)

A for-profit public policy research organization, affiliated with a corporation or merely operating on a for-profit basis.

Of the above types, this report examines the methods by which think tanks achieve impact, with a specific focus on those which are **autonomous and independent**. Such think tanks see themselves as operating in the public interest, while being guided by their expressed values, as outlined in mission statements which explicitly aim to achieve policy or social change.

Their effort to convert “intellect into influence” (a phrase associated with the New York-based Manhattan Institute for Policy Research) can be discerned in the goals of think tanks that span the political spectrum, such as:

Center for American Progress: This left-of-center organization is based in Washington, D.C. and consults closely with Democratic administrations in the United States. Its mission statement says it is “dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.”

American Enterprise Institute: The contrast is notable with the center-right American Enterprise Institute—but similarly, the goal of effecting change can be found here as well. “The American Enterprise Institute is a

public policy think tank dedicated to defending human dignity, expanding human potential, and building a freer and safer world.”

The goal of policy change is by no means limited to think tanks based in the United States. [Policy Exchange](#), a right-leaning group based in London, notes both its autonomy and its impact. “Our research is strictly empirical and we do not take commissions. This allows us to be completely independent and make workable policy recommendations. There are numerous examples of where our policy ideas have been taken forward by government.”

This combination of research and focus on change is also not limited to developed countries. For example, the New Delhi-based [India Foundation](#)

stresses its combination of “analysis, advocacy and awareness.”

The shared goal of achieving policy impact raises the question of how this goal can be achieved. The following stages are based on the author’s experience as research vice president at one think tank (Manhattan Institute) and senior fellow at another (American Enterprise Institute.)



1) BEGIN WITH A “THINK TANK QUESTION”

It is important to make a distinction between a research question undertaken by a change-seeking think tank and one that might be explored by other types of groups. The think tank typically examines a public policy issue either of the current moment or one which the organization anticipates will, or hopes will, become significant. The goal is to raise a question which, once answered, will change the policy conversation.

For example, while a government or university research entity might track the extent of crime, a think tank may go beyond that and address a “think tank” question: will a specific policy approach be likely to reduce crime? This approach was pursued by the Manhattan Institute in the early 1990s when it advanced the idea of public order policing—the so-called “[broken windows](#)” approach, through a series of policy journalism essays. This approach was advanced by a criminologist/practitioner, [George Kelling](#). The work crucially drew on analysis of policing practices tried in the New York City subway systems—and used its findings as the basis for advocating the expansion of the same approach citywide. The approach [described by Kelling](#) and adopted by Police Commissioner William Bratton (who would later be affiliated with the Institute) first in the subway system and then citywide—led to a sharp [reduction in violent crime](#) in New York during the 1990s.

Another example is based on this author’s experience as that Institute’s research vice president. As the shale fracking revolution emerged, increasing natural gas and oil production in the United States during the early 2000s, the Manhattan Institute commissioned a paper which asked a think tank question: might the volume of such production be such that the US, long an energy importer, instead becomes an energy exporter? The resulting paper, which answered the question in the affirmative, was entitled “[Unleashing the North American Energy Colossus](#).”

The author, energy expert Mark P. Mills, concluded that: “A complete reversal in thinking is needed to orient North America around hydrocarbon abundance — and exports. In collaboration with Canada and Mexico, the United States could — and should — forge a broad pro-development, pro-export policy to realize the benefits of our hydrocarbon resources. Such a policy could lead to North America becoming the largest supplier of fuel to the world by 2030.”

Note that the key to what would be an important finding that would lead to substantial policy impact relied fundamentally on asking an original, conversation-changing question.

2) PROMOTION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

No think tank seeking influence and impact can afford to neglect maintaining an active communications arm. This arm should focus on drawing attention both to new research findings as well as previously released findings that may become relevant to policy debate due to changed circumstances. Promotion can and must use the full range of media outlets: traditional prestige print, traditional broadcast, social media, and podcasts. Such an effort relies on scholars who are “ready for prime time”—i.e., who can present their findings in a succinct and understandable way for popular audiences.

When a think tank releases a research paper or other product, it effectively enters a “policy formation food chain.” This process involves a series of steps including the media, third-party validation by other public figures and writers, and, ultimately, the goal of achieving policy change.

In the case of the “North American Energy Colossus” paper, Mills, a former staff member in the President’s Science Office in the Reagan administration, promoted the publication extensively. The Institute’s communications office arranged a wide variety of interviews for Mills, which resulted in him being named 2016 [“Energy Writer of the Year” by the American Energy Society](#).



3) SEIZING THE MOMENT

Thinks tanks which can anticipate change—whether of political leadership or likely events—can take great advantage of them to achieve impact.

Among the most well-known and effective initiatives adopted by a think tank to influence public policy was the self-described “partnership” between the right-of-center, Washington-based [Heritage Foundation and the incoming Reagan administration in 1980](#). The Foundation, in the days immediately following Reagan’s election, provided copies of an 1,100 page “Mandate for Leadership” to all members of the transition team. Reagan, in turn, provided copies to his Cabinet members. The recommendations included (as summarized by Heritage) “detailed policy prescriptions on everything from taxes and regulation to trade and national defense.” Per Heritage, “two-thirds of the ‘Mandate’s’ 2,000 recommendations were adopted or attempted by the Reagan administration.” Whether that count is accurate, there is no doubt the “Mandate” was influential. As the left-leaning [The Washington Post](#) has acknowledged: “The Heritage Foundation has long shaped mainstream Republican policy in Washington. It drafted much of Ronald Reagan’s agenda to slash federal spending.” It is important to note, however, that the Heritage “Mandate” recommendations were specific and guided by values without being repetitive.

This sort of influence should not be understood as confined to any one part of the political spectrum. In the wake of the 2008 election of Barack Obama as US president, the left-leaning Center for American Progress played a similar role as what Heritage did for Reagan—as summarized in an essay by a scholar at another Washington-based think tank, the Brookings Institution.

Scholar Peter Singer [wrote](#): “Just days after the 2008 election the Center for American Progress—a progressive think tank founded in 2003 partly as a reaction to the success of Heritage—released a massive, 704-page outline of a possible agenda for newly elected Barack Obama. The yearlong effort, which resulted in the book *Change for America: A Progressive Blueprint for the 44th President*, helped the Obama administration jump-start its agenda as it came to Washington in early 2009, and more than 50 staff members from CAP have since joined the administration.”

The point here is not to count the ways which Heritage affected Reagan era policy or CAP influenced that of Obama—but, rather, to highlight their understanding of how to seize the moment of the presidential election. Heritage didn’t wait until after the election to start their research and writing; instead, they anticipated Reagan’s victory (or, at the very least, gambled it would occur) and prepared a compendium of previous work they knew

would now gain a sympathetic audience in the White House. This underscores a key point about think tank impact: work that may have been gathering dust can suddenly be relevant, assuming think tank leaders are aware of their “back list” of findings and task a communications team with packaging and promoting it at the right time.

Think tank research can be seen as having an extended “half-life,” in which its influence continues to resonate over time. Another way of thinking about this is to imagine think tanks building up a portfolio of research they can pull from when the relevant time comes up again. For example, farm bill research that can be rehashed every five years when farm bill legislation is renewed.

In the same vein as Heritage and CAP, forward-thinking think tanks continue in their efforts to seize the moment. Anticipating the possibility of a 2023 Republican majority in either the US House or Senate, the American Enterprise Institute prepared—for November 2022 release—a volume entitled “American Renewal:

A Conservative Plan to Save the Country’s Finances and Strengthen the Social Contract.” (This author is a contributor).

There are numerous potential “moments” in which the policy change window opens, with a leadership change being the most dramatic. Obama’s efforts to expand health insurance for poorer Americans, which culminated in the passage of the Affordable Care Act, offered an opportunity for any think tank with relevant expertise to play a role. That is precisely what happened. Notably, two left-liberal think tanks—the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute—are among the list of key groups credited, in a [history](#) of the Obama administration’s health insurance reform law, with playing key roles. Ironically, the idea of a mandate to purchase health insurance had notable input from the right-leaning [Heritage Foundation](#).²

2 The individual mandate originated with [Stanford economist] Alain Enthoven. But Heritage played a role in its promotion.



Events can be seen as constantly providing policy “moments” that think tanks can leverage to advance their policy recommendations. The think tank which has published research on how to strengthen the electricity grid can seize on a power blackout. The think tank that has analyzed crime reduction strategies can seize on dramatic crimes or even reports of problems in recruiting and deploying police officers. The think tank that has analyzed military preparedness can leverage situations of unrest and invasions. The key here is to be ready in advance for events that are highly likely or inevitable.

This goes beyond a mere observation about think tank impact. It is a fundamental concept rooted in political science. In his classic 1984 text, “[Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies](#),” John Kingdon advanced the idea that political changes occur when three “streams,” those being “problems, politics and policies,”

converge. It’s notable that a [Canadian think tank](#) credits Kingdon with providing guidance on achieving impact and tellingly summarizes his insights: “Kingdon’s model shows that while the three streams may be operating independently of one another, all three need to come together in order for a policy to emerge. Each of the streams described by Kingdon has its own forces acting upon it and ultimately influencing it. The policy streams model focuses on the importance of the timing and flow of policy actions. The streams do not just meet up by chance but rather from consistent and sustained action by advocates.” (Emphasis added.)

A more colloquial way to summarize this approach is one popularized by one-time Obama administration presidential chief of staff and subsequent Chicago Mayor Rahm

Emanuel. In 2008, during the incoming Obama administration transition period, Emanuel [famously said](#): “You never want to let a serious crisis go to waste.” He elaborated, saying: “What I mean by that is that it’s an opportunity to do things you thought you could not do before.” Emanuel’s insight is evident in the wide range of policy areas he referenced, including health care, energy, tax policy, and regulatory reform.

In effect, the successful autonomous think tank seeking to effect policy changes can be seen as aligning Kingdon’s three streams by recognizing the opportunities that moments, as described by Emanuel, can provide. It is worth noting that some think tanks also utilize legal action, including seeking court findings to affect, and often overturn, policies they oppose. In the fall of 2022, the California-based Pacific Legal Foundation sought to overturn a controversial Biden administration executive action that aimed to forgive certain types of debt incurred through government loans for higher education. Doing this requires access to a team of sophisticated attorneys. In the student debt case, the Foundation had to identify a plaintiff who could demonstrate legal “standing”—in this case, someone who would incur financial loss due to a state law which taxes canceled debt as income.

Despite its complexity, some think tanks make legal action a centerpiece of their “business model,” as evident in the mission statement of the Arizona-based [Goldwater Institute](#): “We [are] ... the first state-based free-market think tank to deploy a team of lawyers to promote our vision in courts. ... The Institute’s litigation team has advocated for freedom before state supreme courts, federal courts of appeal and even the US Supreme Court.” [Since 2007](#), the Institute has been involved in some 123 legal cases, touching on a wide range of policy areas, including property rights, education, and health care. When placed in the context of Kingdon’s theory, the strategic use of courts, within a robust and transparent legal system where decisions are enforceable, can help align the “streams.”

4) ENGAGING ALLIES

At this point in the think tank “food chain,” a specific initiative may be considered successful in achieving impact. But even a court decision that blocks a policy deemed counterproductive by a think tank may not put an end to the debate. In a democratic polity, legislation can be crafted to address legal concerns but still not fully align with the goals of a think tank. Politics, in a democratic polity, will inevitably matter.

Therefore, a change-oriented think tank may go beyond presenting and promoting its research. It may seek out coalition partners or respond to requests from potential allies to help advance a policy change to fruition.

In the “energy export” example above in which this author was involved, the idea moved from research to reality. Manhattan Institute scholar Mills found support from Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska—itsself an oil and gas-producing state with an interest in lifting rules prohibiting the export of those commodities so as to ship to Japan. In June 2015, Murkowski, who chaired the US Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, asked Mills to present his findings before the committee. This request came after Mills and others made efforts to bring his research to her attention. Mills subsequently appeared before the committee and [his testimony](#) significantly raised the profile of his work. He summarized his findings succinctly before the committee:

“Policies re-oriented around encouraging and facilitating more production, both on private and federal lands, could increase U.S. output well beyond the high levels that have already shocked the world. In particular, decades old restrictions on petroleum and gas exports no longer make sense and are counterproductive.”

Crucially, Mills’s work provided support for the efforts of the [Domestic Energy Producers Alliance](#), an oil-and-gas industry group, as events unfolded and ultimately led to the repeal of the export ban. The leader of the alliance joined Mills in providing Congressional testimony. While it cannot be dismissed that a well-funded industry-based interest group might have succeeded in backing legislation on its own, the complementary roles of Mills and the alliance are instructive. Legislation viewed as self-interested will inevitably encounter opposition. The role of the truly independent think tank and a scholar with a demonstrably expert background provides a powerful complement to interest group goals as they focus on public, rather than merely private, interests. This was evident in the way the export ban issue played out.

5) IMPACT AND POLITICS

Ultimately, the impact of think tank research, dissemination and promotion may lead to public policy change. However, this does not guarantee the specific policy proposed will be adopted, or that it will be adopted in isolation. Think tank scholars seeking impact may need to make strategic decisions during the political process, such as whether to support policy changes they view as compromises or even as flawed. Note I am emphasizing this should be the decision of the research scholar and not the think tank as an institution. As a rule, most independent think tanks do not take formal policy positions as an organization, in part because of restrictions, in the United States at least, on lobbying on the part of nonprofit tax-exempt organizations.

The goal of achieving impact through think tank research may lead to differing conclusions about a scholar's role in political debate, which is a topic worth internal discussion within the think tank. Maintaining a hard-and-fast position may be a useful bargaining point; i.e., if it is signaled that a variety of outcomes will be acceptable, less desirable policies may emerge from multi-party negotiations. On the other hand, engaging in such negotiations to protect the core goals of a policy proposal may be a better approach.

The outcome of the 2015 debate over lifting the long-standing ban on oil and gas exports is a good case in point. Ultimately, Obama signed

the legislation as part of a [larger spending bill to fund the US government](#), making it difficult to block. The legislation not only extended the export ban, but also included a variety of financial subsidies for renewable energy (wind and solar), which Manhattan Institute scholars viewed skeptically. But scholar Mills nonetheless was publicly positive about the outcome, which was viewed as evidence of the think tank's impact. It's worth noting that since then, the US capacity to export liquified natural gas has become an important geostrategic factor in light of Russia's reductions of gas supply to Europe during its war in Ukraine. What began as a think tank research paper played a significant supporting role in a major change in US energy policy with international implications.

CONCLUSION

Not every think tank research project—not even most—will have near-term impact. But a proactive think tank that follows and anticipates events, crises, and leadership changes can have an outsized impact. By asking questions designed to suggest and analyze potential policy change, and by effectively promoting and disseminating their findings, think tanks have the potential to create substantial positive impact.

One overview essay on the concentration and impact of think tanks in Washington (where the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace share a single small stretch of Massachusetts Avenue), makes the point. Peter Singer of the Brookings Institution highlighted this in a 2010 essay, citing examples such as the Heritage Foundation’s Mandate for Leadership and the Center for American Progress’ Change for America “Blueprint.” Singer also cites such classic proposals as that of the Brookings Institution, which laid the groundwork for the Marshall Plan, the post-World War II US assistance in rebuilding war-ravaged Europe. Singer [wrote](#): “With regard to policy, Washington’s think tanks can claim to have created an immense amount of change that has reshaped our nation and the world. Everything from the Marshall Plan to the US Agency for International Development to environmental standards found their origins

in think tanks scattered around Washington.” Singer appears to refer to a [Brookings Institution](#) report as to the implementation of the Marshall Plan goals.

While change and impact are not guaranteed, think tanks operating in open societies, with sound leadership and original scholarship, have the potential to achieve both. To assist donors in making informed decisions about investing in think tanks, this paper has proposed a set of criteria that distinguish independent and autonomous public policy organizations and determine their ability to affect policy decisions. By following the recommendations outlined in this study, donors can direct their funds to those think tanks that are likely to have substantial impact. Ultimately, this approach can assist donors in maximizing the effectiveness of their contributions to public policy research and advocacy efforts.

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Howard has been widely published in policy journals and the popular press, including in *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *The Hill*, *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *City Journal*, *Forbes.com*, the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *National Affairs*, *Reason*, *The New Republic*, *Washington Examiner*, and *The Wilson Quarterly*.

His books include “*The Poor Side of Town: And Why We Need It*” (Encounter Books, 2021); “*Who Killed Civil Society? The Rise of Big Government and Decline of Bourgeois Norms*” (Encounter Books, 2019), “*Philanthropy Under Fire*” (Encounter BroadSides, 2013), and “*America’s Trillion-Dollar Housing Mistake: The Failure of American Housing Policy*” (Ivan R. Dee, 2003).

Howard was a mid-career fellow at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He holds a BS from Boston University’s School of Public Communication.

◆ **ABOUT PHILANTHROPY ROUNDTABLE** ◆

Philanthropy Roundtable is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building and sustaining a vibrant American philanthropic movement that strengthens our free society. To achieve this vision, the Roundtable pursues a mission to foster excellence in philanthropy, protect philanthropic freedom and help donors to advance liberty, opportunity and personal responsibility.