This “special topics” course explores the role and influence of public policy research organizations with particular attention to their history, structure, sources of support, strategies, and policy impact. The focus is on leading, free-standing think tanks in Washington, DC, such as Brookings, Urban, Cato, Pew, Heritage, CAP, and AEI. However, some attention will also be directed to think tanks in other countries and in U.S. states as well as those affiliated with universities and other institutions. The course will include several site visits and sessions at key think tanks.

Books and Readings

Assigned books and chapters will be on reserve at Gelman, but these two useful, recent, and inexpensive paperbacks are a good value and worth purchasing.


Plus, a valuable web site worth tracking:
Think Tank Watch – [www.thinktankwatch.com](http://www.thinktankwatch.com)

Assignments/Grades:

(25%) Research report on a specific think tank
(25%) And presentation of research highlights
(15%) Short briefing on trends and status of think tanks in another country.
(5%) A two-three page summary of highlights and reflections on all the on-site sessions.
(30%) Class participation and attendance – This seminar is based on active, consistent involvement of all participants, engagement with think tank hosts, and being conversant with the readings. This also includes preparation for on-site visits via two thoughtful, relevant, creative questions (to be uploaded on Blackboard prior to site visits) drawn from class readings and the think tank’s web site. Because this class is heavily experiential, attendance is even more essential than usual.

Campus sessions are scheduled 3:30-5:30, but participants need to have flexibility for the site visits which may sometimes start at 3:00 and then end by 4:30 or 5:00. Prompt arrival at site visits is vital for our group security clearance. Cancellations and postponements – beyond the control of the instructor – are always possible. Every effort will be made to e-mail/SMS everyone to communicate any schedule changes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Reading Material</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 11</td>
<td>Course overview; definitions, evolution of think tanks in the US</td>
<td>Weidenbaum, Ch 1-2; GR: Rich, Ch. 1-2; Medvetz, Ch 1; BB: Singer; Ahmad; Goodman.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 18</td>
<td>MLK Day</td>
<td>Preparations for Jan 25 briefings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 25</td>
<td>Think tanks around the world</td>
<td>GR: Draw on McGann’s five books on think tanks outside the US (see the attached bibliography), plus Stone and others; see class handout. Plus internet research for your area.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 1</td>
<td>→ Site visit (tentative)</td>
<td>Think tank’s web site</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 8</td>
<td>Site visit: Heritage Foundation</td>
<td><a href="http://www.heritage.org">www.heritage.org</a></td>
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<td>Feb 22</td>
<td>Think tank strategies and styles</td>
<td>Blackboard/Docs/Rankings: All four articles/monographs</td>
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<td>Mar 7</td>
<td>→ Site visit (tentative)</td>
<td>Think tank’s web site</td>
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<td>Mar 21</td>
<td>→ Site visit (tentative)</td>
<td>Think tank’s web site</td>
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<td>Mar 28</td>
<td>Individual meetings with instructor regarding research report</td>
<td>Due: draft of history, funding, media sections of research report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 4</td>
<td>→ Site visit (tentative)</td>
<td>Think tank’s web site</td>
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<td>Apr 11</td>
<td>Recap: Think tanks &amp; public policy</td>
<td>Textbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 18</td>
<td>Presentation and discussion of think tank research reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 25</td>
<td>Presentation and discussion of think tank research reports</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography: Selected Books on Thinks Tanks and Public Policy

**US Focus**


**US Foreign Policy & Think Tanks**


**Other US**


Struyk, Raymond. *Improving Think Tank Management*. Results for Development Inst., 2015.  

**Think Tanks around the World**


**Forthcoming**


Key Articles & Monographs (2005-15)

Intro


Rankings


U.S. States


Other Academic Articles


News Articles (2014-15):

Warren pressures Brookings over critical economist; independence from political pressure vs. corporate sponsorship: Politico, The Hill, Wall St. Journal.

Washington Post: “Are Think Tanks Obsolete?” “Demand for Instant Results Hurts Think Tanks”

National Interest: “Think Tanks Aren’t Going Extinct. But They Have to Evolve.”

New York Times: “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks.”

Podesta Group: Lobbyists Advise Clients How to “Think Smart” about Think Tanks.
Class Briefing on Think Tanks in Other Countries

Topic Selection

Signup to profile one of the following:

- Canada
- United Kingdom
- Australia & New Zealand
- Germany
- Other Western Europe (Any Combination)
- Eastern Europe (Former Soviet Bloc)
- Russia
- Brazil
- Other Latin America (Any Combination)
- Middle East & North Africa
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- India
- China
- Korea
- Other Asia (Any Combination)

Class Presentation

Offer a 5-7 minute presentation of highlights of the background and status of think tanks in your selected area. In particular, please try to address:

- Structure – how “free-standing” or how linked to political parties, government, business, and so forth?
- Model – Distinct or similar to the Rand contract, Brookings academic, or Heritage advocacy models?
- Impact – Any reputed notable policy impact? What?
- “Neoliberal” – Were/are any of its prominent think tanks promoters of greater economic freedom (market economy), reducing clientelism, restraining government size and scope, pushing free trade? (McGann and others say many were influential.)

Format

Please make your short briefing without PowerPoint! But please bring 15 copies of a concise, one-page synopsis of your highlights using bullets.

Site Visit Preparation and Advance Question Drafting

The think tank site visits are unique opportunities to exploit our location in Washington, DC, and see where and how leading think tanks operate.

The reading assignment for each site visit is the think tank’s web site. Of course pay particular attention to the “About Us” section which will usually recap the background and current status.

Before noon the day of each site visit, please email the instructor (adams@gwu.edu) two thoughtful questions that are uniquely relevant to that organization (i.e., not a generic think tank question).

For the record, the questions can certainly be probing and even challenging, but please make the tone humble and substance respectful.
Think Tank Research Paper

Research practices

● Start with an intensive website review
● As much as possible, use primary sources.
● Obtain Annual Reports for past few years and ideally, for a longer view, 1990 and/or 2000.
● Personal interviews (cite “who, where, when”); ideally in late March or early April, after most background research. Please conduct at least two interviews with researchers or administrators; these may be especially valuable for Part VI. Attend one or two events at the think tanks.

Part V: Output

Media coverage: As soon as possible, content analyze 2014 coverage in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall St. Journal. Take a sample of 30 articles from each outlet and code if the think tank is the primary focus (or author) of the article, only a secondary element, or tertiary (only mentioned in passing). Note how the think tank is getting media attention so you can assess its news profile in elite newspapers.

Other output: for the latest year available, please note the number of...

- Books
- Reports/Monographs
- Papers (short)
- Issue Briefs/Bulletins
- Magazines
- Conferences/Seminars
- Journal articles
- Op-eds/columns
- Testimony before Congress

PART VI: Case Study of Policy Influence

Identify at least one policy recommendation that the think tank touts as one of its signature achievements. Use interviews, new articles, Congressional records, and any other angles to explore the whole process.

PART VII: Overall Assessment

Audience: Based on activities (enumerated above and from any other sources) discuss the relative attention given (a) to the general public, (b) to specialized audiences such as interest groups and academics, and (c) to policy-makers directly.

Classification: How would you characterize your think tank in terms of Rich’s groupings (such as government contractors, advocacy, etc.)? Is there a less subjective way to assess “advocacy”?

Prepare and write your study as if to submit it for publication in Policy Perspectives or elsewhere.

Report Format

Part I: Origins and history
Part II: Funding
Part III: Board and key people
Part IV: Organizational structure and main programmatic activities
Part V: Output: media, publications, Hill
Part VI: Case study of its influence
Part VII: Assessment of its audience, activities, and the overall nature of its influence on public policy

Part II: Funding

Include, from the latest annual report, the percentages of the total funding from: Government grants and contracts, foundations, corporations, endowment (if any), and individuals. If possible, construct a time series of trends for the past ten or twenty years.

Part III: Board and Leadership

Include a review of board members: Percent who are current and former elected officials & cabinet members; note Democratic % and Republican %. Likewise, note the political appointments, if any, of the top researchers.
## Citations of Think Tanks in Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Think Tank</th>
<th>Political Orientation</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>% gain / loss</th>
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Source: FAIR study of 2012 coverage of think tanks in “major U.S. newspapers and on TV and radio.”