

## POLITICS &amp; GOVERNMENT

## From Think Tank to Do Tank

**THE SOURCE:** “Devaluing the Think Tank” by Tevi Troy, in *National Affairs*, Winter 2012.

THINK TANKS ONCE HAD SUCH studious, genteel atmospheres that they were known as “universities without students.” That era is long over, writes Tevi Troy, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, itself one of the older think tanks around. Many of these institutions now serve an array of functions, and an ability to wage partisan warfare is chief among them.

The nation’s oldest and most august think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution, established in 1916 in Washington, D.C., were founded out of a Progressive-era faith in the ability of experts to formulate superior public policies. As the federal government grew in the aftermath of the New Deal, think tanks proliferated, becoming critical sources of guidance for officials contending with an increasingly complex policy-making process.

Though some institutions had partisan tints, all were united in their remove from the messy business of politicking. Frustration with “this studied aloofness” led a band of right-leaning politicians to form the Heritage Foundation in 1973. Interested in determining the Republican agenda as much as informing it, Heritage saw more than 60 percent of its 2,000 policy recommendations adopted by the Reagan ad-

ministration. The 1980s were boom times for conservative policy more broadly, as right-leaning academics gravitated toward the friendly atmosphere inside the Capital Beltway.

“Lose an election, gain a think tank” has since become an adage as each departing administration creates a new crop of think tank derivatives, pushing up the number of think tanks and increasing their attention to “the formulation and advancement of political arguments.” There are now about 1,800 such institutions nationwide, in comparison to around 45 during World War II. Often they focus on single topics, such as Middle East policy or urban affairs. Some still produce rigorous research consumed at the top levels of government. But others also pump out rapid partisan responses to political events, provide safe harbor for former government officials when the political climate is unfavorable, and train like-minded activists in the arts of partisan warfare. The new priorities of the think tanks are reflected in their staffing: Among representative think tanks founded before 1960, 53 percent of scholars hold PhDs; among those founded after 1980, only 13 percent do, one study found.

Troy doesn’t fault think tanks for their activist ways. Messaging has become integral to success in Washington. The real danger is that think tanks could shed their policy orientation completely, becoming nothing more than “part of the intellectual echo chamber of our politics.”



**Inmates at Marble Valley Correctional Facility in Vermont, one of the few states in which virtually all prisoners have the right to vote.**

age number of prisoners in safe Republican districts swelled by about 300. Where Democrats took power, they added about 400 prisoners per safe Democratic district. A party that gains control of the redistricting process in a state shifts a total of about 5,000 prisoners, on average. In some states, such as Texas and Florida, the prison strategy is pursued particularly aggressively.

Maryland now requires prisoners to be counted at their last home address rather than their prison location, and New York and Delaware have similar legislation in the works. But Kelly believes that prisoners may not be the only “phantom constituents” manipulated by gerrymandering officials: Children and noncitizens also get counted but lack the right to vote.