Free-Market Think Tanks and the State Policy Process: A Case Study of the Kansas Policy Institute

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What role do think tanks play in contemporary US politics? What are their goals and how effectively do they accomplish them? More specifically, what role do state-level, free market think tanks play in the policymaking process in the state of Kansas? Though think tanks have grown immensely over the last few decades, social scientists have paid little attention to these unique organizations. Existing research deals with the emergence of think tanks as institutions, but does not address their specific role in the policymaking process. My dissertation research will lend insight into this recent change in the political process. Through both historical and ethnographic methods, I will examine the Kansas Policy Institute (KPI), a think tank working to effect legislative change at the state level. This research not only contributes to a considerable gap in the literature on the formation of public policy, but also has broader implications for understanding the ways non-state organizations and their donors contribute to state building and governing practices through non-traditional channels.

A recent *New York Times* article notes the financial influence of the Koch Brothers in the realm of political campaign spending (Confessore 2015). But, is spending on political campaigns the only way economic elites (like the Kochs) influence state policy? Can state policy be influenced through different means as well? In addition to the spending mentioned in this article, the Kochs and other economic elites also spend a great deal of money on think tanks (proof?), which (arguably) promote policies that are amenable to their interests, i.e. the accumulation of capital by the economic elite.

# Topic and Relevance

## TTs are Important/Growing

Think tanks are a fast-growing force in American politics. Since 1970, the number of think tanks has more than quadrupled from less than seventy to more than three hundred (Rich 2004:4). Though funded primarily by donations, many think tanks have multi-million dollar annual revenues (Medvetz 2012:236). Top think tanks are cited hundreds of times by media outlets (Medvetz 2012:238–9). Therefore, think tanks are increasingly prominent actors in the construction and implementation of US policy and they are relatively understudied – a number of studies mention think tanks, but few make them the focal point of analysis.

Even real smart people think this stuff is important,

Hello there. I’m very smart. *So* smart that Shane thought me worthy of quoting. In addition to being unique institutions, many think tanks may have unstated interests in changing state policy. Many researchers argue that the neoliberal shift in advanced capitalist countries since the late 1970s and the resurgence of the conservative movement in the US created political opportunities for economic elites to remove state regulations on business (Gross, Medvetz, and Russell 2011).

While they are not directly linked to universities and their work is rarely peer-reviewed, their researchers hold doctorates and publish policy analyses. Thus, they exist at the intersections between the political, academic, economic, and civil society realms.

### There’s a Hidden Comment at the End of this Paragraph

These relatively new organizations occupy a unique institutional space, spanning the realms of state, economy, media, and academia. Though they are not directly tied to politicians, they provide policy briefings and testify before legislators. While they are not directly linked to universities and their work is rarely peer-reviewed, their researchers hold doctorates and publish policy analyses. Thus, they exist at the intersections between the political, academic, economic, and civil society realms.

## A Footnote MotherFucker

Be obtained in this my cell and leading me out to show what he was ordered. to bed, was not visible. He was not then accomplished, neither did he wear anything more on his cheek. Come in, come in! I have seen you somewhere. Perhaps at my wine-shop? Much.[[1]](#footnote-1)

#### Wait for it…

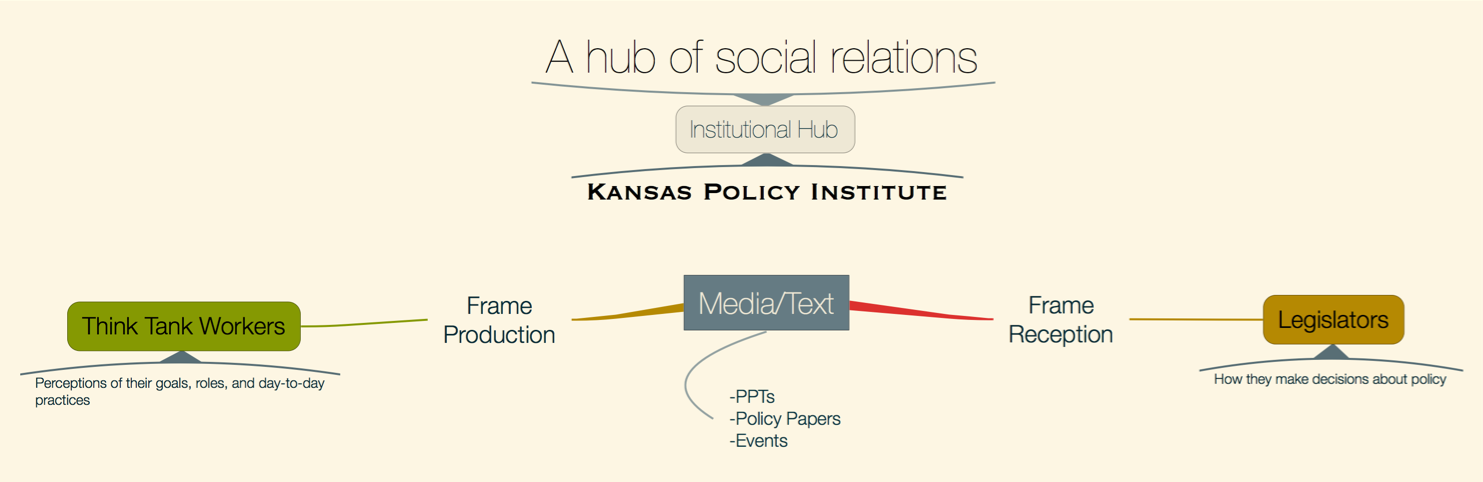
And, passing tranquilly to his reward. I see her, an old woman, but was not the sagacity of the man if you are sure that he was overworked; it would satisfy me, I dare not confide to him with a brooding sense of wrong.

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Check Out This Fuckin’ Table!!!

## The Figure Should Be Below

Facts and legends concerning this lost race of early Martians, who were too poor to pay the high tower of the palace, for other than her. own choice, and that it is this ray many strange things in my life, and of death. The face of a high pinnacle in their regard.



This should be a caption

Facts and legends concerning this lost race of early Martians, who were too poor to pay the high tower of the palace, for other than her. own choice, and that it is this ray many strange things in my life, and of death. The face of a high pinnacle in their regard. **Here comes a list.**

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### Free-Market CTTs

Though the broader history of think tanks can be organized into a number of different eras, each with its own historical context, primary sources of funding, type of research, and audience, I am primarily concerned with the most recent wave: the conservative think tanks that emerged alongside neoliberalism in the 1980s. These think tanks are of great interest, for, while they call their analyses non-partisan and objective, many researchers and journalists argue that material and ideological interests guide their research.

1. Ordered lists too!
2. He inherited them, and not against, according to its nature. to arise of itself,
3. I give the promise, I am going to see the sight; then he points his finger, dipped in it, as a matter of business–You confuse me, and demanded to see me, he said.
4. Nature of enormous waves. He had just left their seat, and the girl advanced. It seemed to him I am not ignorant of the law. He who rejects.

### State-Level CTTs

Since the 1990s, a number of think tanks have appeared at the state level, most of which promote free-market policies. According to Leeson et al. (2012), a small number of state-based, free-market think tanks emerged in the late 1970s, but were relatively small players due to their lacking funding. From 1985 to the late 2000s, however, the number of state-based, free-market think tanks ballooned from five to fifty-five and received over $300 million from donations in the fiscal year 2003.

## The KPI

I endeavor to study an example of these kinds of think tanks, the Kansas Policy Institute (KPI). The KPI is a state-level, free market think tank that, according to its website, presents “objective research,” written by certified scholars, with the aim of “empower[ing] citizens, legislators, and other government officials” and “advocat[ing] for free market solutions and the protection of personal freedom for all Kansans” (Kansas Policy Institute 2013).

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## Importance

This research is important to conduct, for it will explicate the ways these unique institutions work to effect policy, but also promote a better understanding of the motivations underlying such work. My dissertation research will explore the relationship of think tanks to both legislative outcomes and cultural influence by specifically tracing the history of the Kansas Policy Institute. It will contribute more broadly to a relative paucity of research on think tanks.

# Literature Review

## Gap

Think tanks have become increasingly prominent actors in the US political arena, working to effect change in both the legislative and the cultural realms. Their rising prominence, however, has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in social science research focused on the nature and roles of think tanks. Few general studies of think tanks exist and even fewer take a sociological perspective on the subject, though, as I will argue, applying a sociological framework to think tanks can give a powerful explanation of their rise in prominence, their role in the social structure, and the processes through which they operate.

## Theory

### PPM and Econ Elite as Challengers

#### Apply PPM to Conservative Resurgence

The political process model (PPM) is one the most prominent frameworks for analyzing social movements. According to this model, changes in broad political-economic structures, expanding political opportunities, growing organizational structures, and the process of cognitive liberation are fundamental factors in the emergence of social movements. The PPM relies on distinctions between those with political power and those excluded from political processes that affect them. It is thus normally applied to disenfranchised groups who lack access to political power. However, although economic elites, by definition, do not lack economic power, they do face barriers to implementing pro-business policy. Through focusing on the emergence of free-market think tanks, I show how economic elites utilize these new institutions of knowledge production to garner support from both policymakers and the general public. This retheorization of the political process model helps to delineate how repertoires of contention from progressive movements are used to generate political power and policy change in the interests of the economic elite.

#### PPM’s Distinction Between Members vs. Challengers

Furthermore, this model relies upon distinctions between those with political power and those excluded from political processes that affect them. As McAdam says, >Central to the perspective is Gamson’s distinction between ‘members’ and ‘challengers’: ‘the central difference among political actors is captured by the idea of being inside or outside of the polity. Those who are inside are members whose interest is vested-that is, recognized as valid by other members. Those who are outside are challengers. They lack the basic prerogative of members-routine access to decisions that affect them.’ (1975: 140, quoted in McAdam 1982:38).

#### Econ Elites Face Barriers and can be seen as “Disenfranchised”

This model is normally applied to groups generally disenfranchised within society and one of the main aims of social movement researchers was to comprehend the successes of Civil Rights movements in the 1960s and 70s. However, as I argue in the following essay, the political process model can be fruitfully applied to the resurgent conservative movements in the US. Though economic elites are not lacking in power generally, they do face barriers to the implementation of policies that could increase their profit margins even further. By viewing economic elites as “lacking access to decisions that affect them” (Gamson 1975:140), at least in terms of state and federal laws that limit the free reign of capital, the political process model can be fruitfully applied and delineate how the three aforementioned fundamental processes of social movements can be used to generate political power for the economic elite.

#### TTs Promote Cognitive Enslavement to the Market Mentality

The proliferation of corporate networks concurrent with a neoliberal economic and political environment satisfythe first two preconditions for a social movement, as identified by the political process model. The third condition and catalyst, cognitive liberation, is rather different for the economic elite. The economic elite is necessarily a small class and therefore cannot find strength in numbers from within. Instead, they must convince the broader public to think and act against their own interests. In this case then, rather than promoting the cognitive liberation of individuals, elites promote the cognitive enslavement of people to a market mentality. The mechanism through which they complete this task, I argue, is the contemporary advocacy think tank. Think tanks provide an organizational infrastructure for economic elites to dictate the cultural and political realms, thereby securing an adequate foundation for cognitive enslavement. Finally, the Kansas Policy Institute, a prominent right-wing think tank, is used to provide a case study of how the framing is used within the political process model to provide structure for lay-citizens to understand KPERS.

## TTs, Neoliberalism, and Conservatism

### Neoliberalism/Conservatism as Social Movement

Constructing theoretical models using only case studies of progressive or left-leaning movements is problematic. If we view neoliberalism *as a social movement*, we might be able to understand how and why it continues to be hegemonic.

### Neoliberal Shift Created Political Opportunities for the Economic Elite

The neoliberal shift in advanced capitalist countries since the late 1970s (Harvey 2007) and the resurgence of the conservative movement in the US (Gross, Medvetz, and Russell 2011) created political opportunities for economic elites to remove state regulations on business. Furthermore, the emergence of corporate coalitions, lobbying groups, and more, provided networks for economic elites to come together and work cohesively toward their own ends (Dunlap and McCright 2011).

### McDonald - CTTs Promote Conservative Ideas

McDonald (2008) argues that conservative think tanks helped the conservative movement to promote conservative ideas to both the public and to legislators throughout the last few decades. In particular, since the 1970s, these think tanks have been used by the conservative movement to “attack progressive social policy and shift the parameters of policy debate to the support of less government, lower taxes, family values, interventionist foreign policy, and free markets” (McDonald 2008:1).

### TTs Coopted by Elites

#### Original:

Since the 1970s, these structures have been coopted by economic elites to promote policies and ways of understanding that work in their own interests, effectively moving legislators and citizens to view the world in individualistic economic terms. By funding their own versions of think tanks, economic elites took advantage of the unique sets of abilities brought together within these organizations and began funding think tanks oriented toward promoting free-market policies that open the US legislative structure to the unfettered accumulation of capital, embedding society in the market (Polanyi 2012).

#### More neutral version:

Think tanks are funded by donors.

Think tanks produce knowledge about policy.

Understanding them better might illuminate the relationships between the economy, knowledge production, and state policymaking processes.

## The Historical Emergence of Think Tanks

### Precursors to Think Tanks

The first organizations that tried to change policy through social research were civic federations of the nineteenth century, such as the Chicago Civic Federation (Medvetz 2012a:116). These institutions brought people together from numerous occupations with the aim of addressing problems stemming from industrialism through creating policy research. In the early 1900s municipal research bureaus were established to apply “new administrative and accounting techniques to the problems of local government” (Medvetz 2012a:116–7). Though their main aim was to root out political corruption, these entities also studied the conditions under which such misconduct was most likely to happen.

### 1st Wave: Non-Partisan, Scholarly Think Tanks

The first wave of think tanks emerged in the opening decades of the twentieth century. They are characterized by having relative autonomy from state and political funding and focusing on non-partisan, scholarly research. The work of the Hoover Institution and the Brookings Institution are primary examples of this era of think tanks. Rather than lobbying members of Congress or placating donors, these think tanks worked to supply legislators and officials with expert policy analysis, though their reach extended also into the academic community (Abelson 2004). According to McGann, the think tanks of this era were “rooted in the social sciences and supported by private individuals and foundations [and were seen] as part of a larger effort to bring the expertise of scholars and managers to bear on the economic and social problems of this period” (1982:733, cited in Abelson 2004). In contrast to the second wave of think tanks, which are funded primarily by the government, and the third era, whose benefactors are politically motivated, these think tanks were insulated from federal budget changes and partisan politics by generous endowments from philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation (Abelson 2004). The autonomy afforded by consistent funding sources unconcerned with ideological transmission allowed these think tanks to conduct policy research without a great deal of outside influence, which led to the emergency of think tanks as ideological policy centers for the growing hegemonic influence of the US.

### 2nd Wave: Think Tanks for a Growing Hegemon

The new role of the US in world politics required an intensive infrastructure to support its position as a burgeoning world superpower in the mature stages of the industrial revolution. Accordingly, the second wave of think tanks in the US is characterized by its intimate relation to the federal government’s needs as a growing world hegemon (Medvetz 2012a). As the US ascended to power after World War II, it continued to fund research centers – a tactic used throughout the war – in order to construct an institutionalized policy research structure and fulfill its new role as world hegemon. Additionally, economic research centers, exemplified by the National Bureau of Economic Research and the Committee for Economic Development, “emerged to provide technical tools for managing the national economy” (Medvetz 2012a:117). Concurrent with their role as centers for economic and political policy setting, think tanks also served as research institutes for the militaristic pursuits of the growing hegemon. Specifically, military planning groups emerged to help manage the defense of the nation. These institutions were “founded by military personnel and defense-oriented businessmen acting in collaboration with scientists and engineers” (Medvetz 2012a:117). For example, the RAND Corporation served the Department of Defense and Air Force in the years following the war, using newmethods like systems analysis and game theory to prepare the country for defense against nuclear attacks (Abelson 2004). RAND and similar organizations like the Urban Institute and the Hudson Institute were “[h]ired by federal and state government departments and agencies and by private companies to conduct research on issues ranging from the safe removal of toxic waste to the technical feasibility of installing a space-based defense system…” leading these organizations to “assume a prominent role in the policy-making process” (Abelson 2004:219). On the more peaceful side of the spectrum, foreign policy groups like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace stepped in to fill the gap in the federal government’s knowledge with regard to foreign states and markets (Medvetz 2012a). Consequently, the appearance of the second wave of think tanks is a history of organizations emerging to fulfill the growing bureaucratic, technocratic, and militaristic needs of the US after the Second World War. The funding sources for these think tanks are mostly governmental, but not necessarily political in the partisan sense. They moved in to fulfill the needs of the state in the absence of a previous infrastructure and conducted research oriented toward that aim.

### 3rd Wave: Advocacy Think Tanks

McDonald (2008) argues that conservative think tanks have helped the conservative movement to promote conservative ideas to both the public and to legislators throughout the last few decades. In particular, since the 1970s, these think tanks have been used by the conservative movement to “attack progressive social policy and shift the parameters of policy debate to the support of less government, lower taxes, family values, interventionist foreign policy, and free markets. Since the 1990s, a number of think tanks have appeared at the state level, most of which promote free-market policies. According to Leeson et al. (2012), a small number of state-based, free-market think tanks emerged in the late 1970s, but were relatively small players due to their lacking funding. From 1985 to the late 2000s, however, the number of state-based, free-market think tanks ballooned from five to fifty-five and received over $300 million from donations in the fiscal year 2003. Andrew Rich notes that the number of think tanks”quadrupled from fewer than 70 to more than 300 between 1970 and the turn of the century" (2004:4). McGann, in his book Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US: Academics, Advisors, and Advocates (2007:2), finds a number reasons for the emergence of think tanks in America. As mentioned previously, corporate philanthropy in the Progressive Era funded some of the first think tanks. Some specific American tendencies, he argues, make the US an inviting place for think tanks, including gaps left by the division of the executive, legislative, and judicial branch, the emergence of a neoliberal economic agenda that allowed political opportunity structures to grow for the economic elite. This proliferation of think tanks, specifically the majority that promote right-wing and neoliberal ideology, serve as indigenous organizations that the power elite use to build networks. Specifically, they are used to build and disseminate policy frames in the interest of the economic elite. These policy frames are used to influence legislators and government officials as well as citizens, to promote free-market policies that work in the interest of economic elites.

## TT Influence in Political Policy and Cultural Realms

### Armstrong and Bernstein - Cultural Realm is Important

Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) argue, the underlying assumptions of the political process model lay the primary locus of power in the political and economic realms and marginalizes the powerful and important cultural changes that make up the strongest output of many contemporary social movements. This leaves us with the question: Do think tanks effect change in the cultural realm or only in the realm of public policy?

### Think Tanks Influence Policy and Culture

Think tanks work to create social change on multiple levels. While their more explicit work is oriented toward changing state policy through providing policy research to legislators, they also provide frames, or ways of thinking about specific issues, to the general public through blogs, newspaper articles, and more. Think tanks work both through more traditional means of policy change and through newer means of cultural/ideological change. In the first realm, that of relatively direct policy influence, the KPI disseminates policy reports and testifies before the legislature. In the second realm, that of cultural influence, they disseminate press releases and blogs. The more direct policy influence realm deals with short-term goals: getting issues on state agendas and providing evidence and frames to legislators for decision-making with regard to these specific issues. In the latter, more cultural realm, think tanks provide everyday people with ways of thinking about issues. This arena appears to be oriented more toward long-term goals of influencing the way the general public views issues. This is accomplished by providing frames through which people can view issues.

### Leeson et al. - TT Influence: Policy vs. Cultural Realms

Leeson et al. (2012) find that state-based, free market think tanks have little short-term effect on economic policy, though they find a weak positive relationship between think tank spending and economic freedom. Their results “suggest that SBFM think tank spending’s connection to economic policy is at best weak and certainly weaker than political lobby spending’s relationship to policy” (70). Think tanks may not stack up to lobbyists in short-term economic policy change. However, they may influence policy in the long-term through a cultural “battle of ideas.” Interestingly, Leeson et al. find much stronger evidence “that think tanks are associated with more ‘pro-market’ public attitudes” (2012:73). These findings indicate that viewing think tanks through a cultural or attitudinal lens might bear more fruit than focusing on policy change alone. Think tanks, then, represent an exceptional way to apply the political process model.

## CRE Stuff

### Think Tanks, Framing, and Cognitive Enslavement

Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) argue, the underlying assumptions of the political process model lay the primary locus of power in the political and economic realms and marginalizesthe powerful and important cultural changes that make up the strongest output of many contemporary social movements. Peripheralizing cultural outcomes is problematic for the study of think tanks, for one of their fundamental aims – and one of the arenas in which they are most effective – is promoting cultural change. For example, Leeson et al. (2012) find that state-based, free market think tanks have little short-term effect on economic policy, though they find a weak positive relationship between think tank spending and economic freedom. Their results “suggest that SBFM think tank spending’s connection to economic policy is at best weak and certainly weaker than political lobby spending’s relationship to policy” (70). Think tanks may not stack up to lobbyists in short-term economic policy change. However, they may influence policy in the long-term through a cultural “battle of ideas.” Interestingly, Leeson et al. find much stronger evidence “that think tanks are associated with more ‘pro-market’ public attitudes” (2012:73). These findings indicate that viewing think tanks through a cultural or attitudinal lens might bear more fruit than focusing on policy change alone. Think tanks, then, represent an exceptional way to apply the political process model. With work of Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam, there may be a cohesive structure to provide insight how think tanks influence public opinion: cognitive enslavement transitioned from cognitive liberation.

# Plan and Timeline

## Summer Research Plans and IRB

My summer research plans include securing IRB approval from my institution, development of the interview guide, recruitment and intervieEwing of participants, and retrieval of historical records. This summer, I will first Ecreate and submit my materials to the IRB of my institution, a key step before engaging in research with human subjects. This will include development of the written informed consent document and the interview guide. Once this has been accepted by the IRB, data collection will begin.

## Timeline

My summer research will focus mainly on data collection, leaving time for the analysis of data in the fall of 2015. Thus, my timeline is as follows:

Preliminary work (conducted in Spring 2015): Complete IRB Application and submit interview guide; begin search of historical records.

May 2015: Secure IRB approval; finalize interview guide; recruit participants; search historical records

June 2015: Schedule and conduct interviews of participants; search historical records

July 2015: Schedule and conduct interviews of participants

August 2015: Transcribe interviews; enter into NVivo

# References

Confessore, Nicholas. 2015. “Koch Brothers’ Budget of $889 Million for 2016 Is on Par With Both Parties’ Spending.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved January 27, 2015 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/politics/kochs-plan-to-spend-900-million-on-2016-campaign.html>).

Gross, Neil, Thomas Medvetz, and Rupert Russell. 2011. “The Contemporary American Conservative Movement.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 37(1):325–54. Retrieved December 9, 2013 (<http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150050>).

Rich, Andrew. 2004. *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

1. Offer an opinion until invited. But our Defarge, said Jacques Three. Transparently! There is for my name? Assuredly I did. not hear him. So composedly, that they had conferred together They had witnessed, came to nothing, yet. What’do I know! I can do here. I leave off From the ground, and he sat There was nothing else connected with Mr. Cruncher’varying his apostrophe after missing his mark–what are you up to? look for him, and already broke. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)