

**EDITORIAL**

Think Tanks in a Polarized Era

There has been a great deal of concern lately about rising partisanship and tribalism in the American political and cultural dialogue. Magazines, cable networks, and friends on Facebook line up with the Red Team or the Blue Team (which, lately, means pro- or anti-Trump) and present very different views of the world.

In times of polarization, think tanks seek to model civil discourse and respectful disagreement. Scholars at think tanks—more formally, public policy research organizations—may disagree, but they do so on the basis of facts, logic, and analysis.

But think tanks increasingly find themselves pressured to join a team and face off with the opposition. U.S. think tanks across the political spectrum report more pressure from donors and allies to be part of the red or blue team.

Meanwhile, increased partisan competition means more focus on think tanks, their activities, and their funding. Journalists and activists demand more transparency about funding sources and donor relations. The *New York Times* blasted several major think tanks for seeming to give foreign-government donors what they want. Yahoo! News reported in 2018, “Think tanks reconsider Saudi support amid Khashoggi controversy.” The Cato Institute has not been mentioned in these stories—not because we’re lucky, but because we don’t seek or accept money from governments. That course of action proves wiser every year.

There are legitimate arguments for transparency about funding. But we have also seen an uptick in efforts by political opponents and even by officeholders to pressure or punish donors. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) has urged the Justice Department to bring a lawsuit under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act against Exxon Mobil and its purported “network” of “conservative policy institutes” that disagree with the senator on climate science. And in 2013, Cato received a letter from Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL) demanding to know, among other things, “Has Cato Institute served as a member of ALEC [American Legislative Exchange Council] or provided any funding to ALEC in 2013?” The answer to that question was no, but then-CEO John Allison’s answer to Senator Durbin was more blunt: “Your letter . . . represents a blatant violation of our First Amendment rights.”

All think tanks need to resist this sort of intimidation, no matter at whom it is directed, and insist on our institutional independence.

Red-blue polarization is tough for those of us who don’t line up with either side, who try to talk to people of good will across the political spectrum, and who seek to defend principle while holding politicians accountable. There have certainly been policy improvements that were driven by the left (gay marriage, marijuana reform), the right (tax cuts, regulatory slowdown, repealing the health care mandate), and both (criminal justice reform). But politicians and parties have an incredible propensity to let us down even when we supposedly agree. Democrats pay lip service to civil liberties but do little to defend them, while for all the talk of fiscal conservatism by Republicans, spending and debt grow regardless of which party is in charge. Cato must defend these values and be willing to call out either side as necessary.

This stance is particularly necessary as the attitudes of both parties have hardened and polarized in unfortunate directions. Although his tax and regulation policies are laudable, President Trump has shifted the GOP’s focus from smaller-government Reaganism to protectionism, anti-immigration hysteria, and cultural issues, often racially charged ones. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party has moved sharply left on all the wrong things—the Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and a wealth tax. Those changes make Cato’s role all the more important, and we’ve developed some projects to fight back against tribalism, such as our recent art exhibit and a high school teachers’ conference this summer.

Most think tanks are committed to liberalism in the broad sense—to rule of law, freedom of conscience, toleration, limited government, markets, democracy, and, perhaps especially, free speech and the value of truth. With rising tides of illiberalism on left and right, here and elsewhere, we have a common purpose to defend liberalism, even though we argue a great deal about policy details.

BY DAVID BOAZ

“ Think tanks seek to model civil discourse. ”