



Tilting Rightward: C-SPAN's Coverage of Think Tanks

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This study's main finding is that C-SPAN coverage of think tanks overwhelmingly favors conservative think tanks while left-of-center think tanks are under-represented. In 2006, conservative think tanks received 43.76 percent of total think tank coverage. Conservative/ libertarian and centrist think tanks received 6.94 percent and 31.76 percent respectively. Center-left and progressive think tanks, on the other hand, only received 12.73 percent and 4.86 percent respectively. Thus, the combined conservative and conservative/libertarian think tanks got an absolute majority of 50.7 percent representation on C-SPAN. Everything left of center got only 17.59 percent, just one third of the coverage received by the Right. C-SPAN's coverage of think tanks suggests it has failed to fulfill its mission to provide "a balanced presentation of points of view." A review of recent polls also suggests that C-SPAN's coverage of think tanks is not only off-balance in absolute numerical terms but also relative to public opinion in a wide range of political issues.

According to its mission statement, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) was created to provide its audience with "a balanced presentation of points of view" concerning public policy.¹ However, a look at its coverage of the country's top think tanks in 2006 suggests that it failed to achieve this goal. A survey of C-SPAN coverage of public events, interviews, panels and speeches featuring the country's top think tanks in 2006 reveals a strong imbalance towards think tanks that represent conservative points of view, an imbalance that—according to recent polling data—is at odds with the opinions of most Americans on a wide range of policy issues.

The present study compiled the total annual C-SPAN coverage of the nation's top think tanks, ranked according to total annual media citations by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).² FAIR conducts its research annually and each report includes the top 25 think tanks for any given year. Total media citations are determined through the search engine Lexis-Nexis.

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¹ "The C-SPAN Mission", C-SPAN. Available online: [<http://www.c-span.org/about/company/index.asp?code=MISSION>].

² Michael Dolney. "Study Finds First Drop in Think Tank Cites", FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), June, 2006. Available online: [<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2897>].

In order to broaden this study's data sample, any think tank ranked in FAIR's top 25 list throughout the last three annual studies is included. In other words, instead of just using the 2006 list of top 25 think tanks, this study uses all 40 think tanks that have appeared in, and some disappeared from, the ranking.³

Total C-SPAN coverage includes any video of an event, talk show appearance, interview, speech or panel discussion featuring or containing the participation of a scholar, fellow, researcher or general member of the top think tanks. The present study also classifies the political orientation of the top think tanks according to the classification scheme developed by FAIR: Conservative, Conservative/Libertarian, Centrist, Center-Left and Progressive.⁴

Data for the present study was collected from the C-SPAN video archive, available online at www.c-spanarchives.org. This web resource, according to C-SPAN, represents the "entire" C-SPAN archive. Every event, panel discussion, speech, talk show appearance or interview, either containing a single member or several members of a think tank, was counted as one data entry for the given think tank. Video coverage simultaneously featuring members from multiple think tanks are counted as one point for each think tank represented.

This study's main finding is that C-SPAN coverage overwhelmingly favors conservative think tanks while virtually ignoring progressive ones. In 2006, conservative think tanks received 43.76 percent of total coverage. Conservative/libertarian and centrist think tanks, received 6.94 percent and 31.71 percent respectively. Center-left and progressive think tanks, on the other hand only received 12.73 percent and 4.86 percent respectively (see [Table](#) and [Figure](#) below). Thus, the combined conservative and conservative-libertarian think tanks got an absolute majority of 50.7 percent representation on C-SPAN. Everything left of center got only 17.59 percent, just one third of the coverage received by the Right.

Off Balance and Out of Touch

The imbalance towards conservative points of view, in this context, is not only problematic in so far as C-SPAN prides itself on being a public service that provides "balanced coverage." It is also problematic to the extent that the majority of Americans are more likely to identify with points of view represented by progressive think tanks, as is demonstrated by recent polls. Studies conducted by a wide range of organizations, including University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), CBS, the Pew Research Center and CNN, reveal that Americans are more likely to hold progressive than conservative points of view on most of today's mainstream political issues.

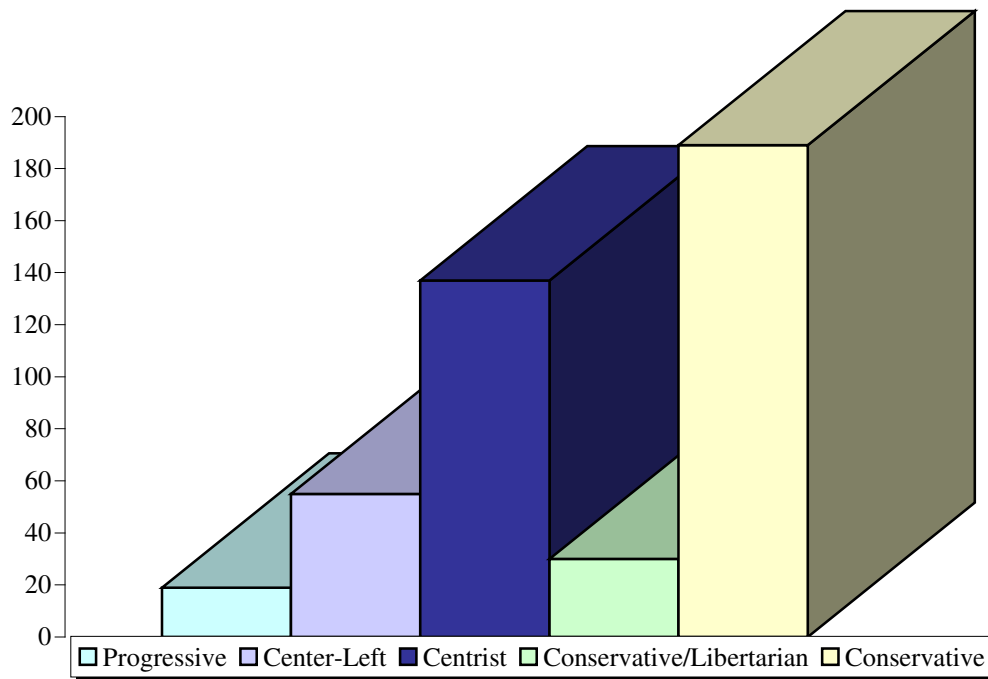
For example, a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll conducted this year found that 64 percent said yes when asked if they thought "the government should provide a national health insurance program for all Americans, even if this would require higher taxes." Only 35 percent responded "no" and two percent had no opinion.⁵

Similarly, an even larger percentage favors progressive and center-left points of view with regards to the treatment of terrorism suspects. A poll conducted last year by the PIPA found that the vast majority of respondents thought terrorism suspects should be entitled to due process.

³ Think tanks that did not register any coverage are not included in the table below.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Newport, Frank. "Prescription for Healing Healthcare from the People", Gallup News Service. April 26, 2007. Available online: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27322/Prescription-Healing-Healthcare-From-People.aspx>.

Figure 1: C-SPAN Coverage of Think Tanks in 2006, by Political Orientation

Specifically, 73 percent of respondents believed that terrorism suspects should have “the right to request and receive a hearing where the detainee can make the case for why he should not be detained.” Also, 75 percent believed detainees should have the “right not to be tortured.”⁶

With regard to the occupation of Iraq, a poll conducted in July by CBS and the *New York Times* found that two-thirds of respondents favored either partial or full troop withdrawal, 30 percent and 36 percent, respectively. On the other hand, 15 percent thought troop levels should remain the same, seven percent were unsure and only 12 percent thought troop levels should increase. In other words, 66 percent were in favor of partial or full troop withdrawal while a mere 27 percent favored maintaining the status quo or deploying more troops.⁷

Progressive and center-left points of view also dominate public opinion about trade policy when it comes to assessing the domestic impact of trade liberalization. The Pew Research Center found that 44 percent responded that “free trade” has led to lower wages in the U.S. while only 11 percent said it has led to higher wages, with 30 percent responding that “free trade” has led to no change in wages. Similarly, 48 percent said that “free trade” has led to job losses while only 12 percent said it has created jobs and 25 percent saw little difference.⁸

⁶ “Americans Support Full Due-Process Rights for Terrorism Suspects”, Program on International Policy Attitudes. July 17, 2006. Available online:

[http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/btjusticehuman_rightsra/228.php?nid=&id=&pnt=228&lb=brusc].

⁷ New York Times/CBC News Poll, Conducted between July 20-22, 2007.

Available online: [http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/20070723_poll_results.pdf].

⁸ “Free Trade Agreements Get a Mixed Review”, Pew Research Center. December 19, 2006.

Available online: [<http://people-ress.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=299>].

Table 1: C-SPAN Coverage of Think Tanks in 2006

| <i>Think Tank</i> | <i>Number of Separate Incidents</i> | <i>Political Orientation</i> | <i>Coverage % by Orientation*</i> |
|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Economic Policy Institute | 8 | Progressive | |
| Center on Budget and Policy Priorities | 2 | Progressive | |
| Center for Economic and Policy Research | 1 | Progressive | 4.86% |
| Center for Public Integrity | 4 | Progressive | |
| Center for Defense Information | 2 | Progressive | |
| Institute for Policy Studies | 4 | Progressive | |
| Center for American Progress | 45 | Center-Left | |
| Urban Institute | 7 | Center-Left | 12.73% |
| Century Foundation | 3 | Center-Left | |
| Council on Foreign Relations | 24 | Centrist | |
| RAND Corporation | 11 | Centrist | |
| Carnegie Endowment | 14 | Centrist | |
| Brookings Institution | 33 | Centrist | |
| Institute for International Economics | 8 | Centrist | |
| Asia Society | 3 | Centrist | 31.71% |
| Aspen Institute | 15 | Centrist | |
| Inter-American Dialogue | 2 | Centrist | |
| New America Foundation | 19 | Centrist | |
| Center for Politics | 2 | Centrist | |
| National Bureau of Economic Research | 1 | Centrist | |
| Progressive Policy Institute | 5 | Centrist | |
| CATO | 30 | Conservative/Libertarian | 6.94% |
| Center for Strategic and International Studies | 32 | Conservative | |
| Hoover Institution | 3 | Conservative | |
| Manhattan Institute | 6 | Conservative | |
| Lexington Institute | 1 | Conservative | |
| Discovery Institute | 4 | Conservative | 43.76% |
| Heritage Foundation | 43 | Conservative | |
| American Enterprise Institute | 60 | Conservative | |
| Washington Institute for Near East Policy | 15 | Conservative | |
| Family Research Council | 7 | Conservative | |
| Hudson Institute | 18 | Conservative | |
| Total | 432 | | 100% |

*As determined by criteria developed by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. For more information, see Dolny, Michael. "Think Tank Sources Fall, but Left Gains Slightly," *Extra!*, [March/April 2007](#). Available online: [<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=3129>], and Dolny, Michael. "Sidebar: Defining the Think Tanks," *Extra!*, [May/June 2006](#). Available online: [<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2900>]

A majority progressive sentiment is also evident in another Pew poll looking at trends in political values and attitudes that was conducted this year. The poll found that 73 percent agreed with the statement “today it is really true that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.” The poll also found that 69 percent think the government has a responsibility to “take care of people who can’t take care of themselves.”⁹

Finally, a poll conducted by CNN and the Opinion Research Corporation found that the majority of respondents believed that global warming is a fact and that it is caused by human activity. Specifically, 54 percent said it is a fact that cars and industry cause global warming. On the other hand, four percent were unsure, 20 percent believed global warming is a fact but considered it a natural phenomenon and only 22 percent considered it an unproven theory.¹⁰

Conclusion

C-SPAN's strong bias toward right-wing think tanks, and its relatively scant coverage of left-of-center think tanks, raise serious concerns about its programming.

These concerns are especially important in light of the high degree of credibility C-SPAN enjoys with its audience. Last year a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that respondents considered C-SPAN the third most credible television news outlet after CNN and 60 Minutes, respectively.¹¹ As such, C-SPAN has a responsibility to not only fulfill its mission statement, providing truly balanced coverage of think tanks and, more importantly, policy ideas. The station might want to adopt more effective guidelines to ensure that important and, in some cases, widely held viewpoints backed by solid empirical evidence are not so under-represented, or un-represented entirely.

C-SPAN may want to consider guidelines similar to those of the BBC, which state: “we strive to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented.”¹²

⁹ “Political Landscape More Favorable to Democrats: Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2007”, Pew Research Center. March 22, 2007. Available online: [<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/312.pdf>].

¹⁰ CNN Opinion Research Corporation: Conducted between May 4-6, 2007. Available online: [<http://i.a.cnn.net/cnn/2007/images/06/15/may.poll.pdf>].

¹¹ “No Outlet Stands Out as Most Reliable”, Pew Research Center. July 30, 2006. Available online: [<http://people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=1069>].

¹² “Section 4: Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion,” Editorial Guidelines, BBC. Available online: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/assets/guidelinedocs/chapter_four.pdf].