

## MORE THOUGHTS PER DOLLAR? The Relative Efficiency of Liberal and Conservative Think Tanks

Conservatives often pride themselves on being good managers, maximizing efficiency in either business or the public sector. However, conservative think tanks do not seem to follow conservative ideology in this respect. When it comes to objective measures of impact on public debate – media citations or Internet reach per budget dollar – the conservative think tanks are outperformed by their liberal counterparts. These findings are based on an analysis of think tank operating budgets, website statistics and a recent study by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

While conservative think tanks have more impact in the media and on the Internet in absolute terms, their budgets are many times larger than those of their liberal counterparts. Comparing budgets with media citations and website usage, the top progressive performers do better than the top conservative performers in both categories by at least a factor of two. Yet, conservatives' overwhelming advantage in funding allows them to overcome their inefficient use of money.

### Media Citations

The top three think tanks in media citations per dollar in 2004 were progressive or center-left in political orientation: Center for Economic and Policy Research, Center for American Progress and Economic Policy Institute, respectively. *Table 1* shows the top ten think tanks ranked by citations per dollar. The most efficient conservative think tank by this measure is the American

**Table 1**  
**Media Citations Per Dollar (2004)**

Rank	Organization	Political Orientation <sup>1</sup>	Total Citations <sup>2</sup>	FY03 Budget <sup>3</sup> (Dollars)	Citations per \$10,000
1	Center for Economic and Policy Research	<i>Progressive</i>	283	801,906	3.53
2	Center for American Progress	<i>Center-Left</i>	881	2,943,509	2.99
3	Economic Policy Institute	<i>Progressive</i>	1,386	4,939,243	2.81
4	Center for Public Integrity	<i>Progressive</i>	710	4,363,306	1.63
5	American Enterprise Institute	Conservative	2,902	19,324,795	1.50
6	Cato Institute	Conservative/Libertarian	2,241	15,630,490	1.43
7	Brookings Institution	<i>Centrist</i>	4,724	36,393,857	1.30
8	Family Research Council	Conservative	914	8,878,019	1.03
9	New America Foundation	<i>Centrist</i>	289	2,888,727	1.00
10	Center for Strategic and International Studies	Conservative	1,873	20,292,732	0.92

Source: *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting* and author's calculations, see appendix.

<sup>1</sup> Political orientation is based on FAIR's evaluation of published work and media comments.

<sup>2</sup> Media citations determined by Michael Dolney of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), using Nexis, available at <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2534>

<sup>3</sup> Think tank budgets for FY03. Fiscal years vary according to organizational calendar. FY04 budgets not available.

Enterprise Institute. Its ratio of 1.5 citations per \$10,000 is less than half the 3.5 ratio of the Center for Economic and Policy Research and only slightly more than half the ratios for the Center for American Progress and the Economic Policy Institute. The CATO Institute comes in just behind the American Enterprise Institute.

## Internet Reach

The conservative think tanks fared somewhat better in website usage per dollar, but the list is topped by two progressive/center-left think tanks. Our analysis, which calculated the ratio of the number of visits to an institution's website (e.g., daily reach average over three months) over its operating budget, showed the Center for American Progress and the Center for Economic and Policy Research at the top. Both think tanks were more than twice as efficient in Internet reach per dollar as the CATO Institute (3rd), the leading conservative think tank by this measure. However, the CATO Institute is followed by another conservative think tank, the National Center for Policy Analysis in fourth place. The Heritage Foundation (9th) and the Manhattan Institute (10th) also make it into the top ten. On the progressive side, the Economic Policy Institute (6th) and the Family Research Council (7th) also rank in the top ten. (A fuller ranking appears in the appendix.) As was the case with media citations, the conservative think tanks received more overall website visits than liberal think tanks due to their funding advantage.

**Table 2**  
**Website Usage Per Dollar (June-September 2005)**

Rank	Organization	Political Orientation	Website Usage <sup>4</sup>	FY03 Budget (Dollars)	Website Usage per \$1,000,000
1	Center for American Progress	<i>Center-Left</i>	38.00	2,943,509	12.91
2	Center for Economic and Policy Research	<i>Progressive</i>	7.25	801,906	9.04
3	Cato Institute	Conservative/ Libertarian	67.50	15,630,490	4.32
4	National Center for Policy Analysis	Conservative	15.00	4,556,452	3.29
5	Center for Public Integrity	<i>Progressive</i>	10.50	4,363,306	2.41
6	Economic Policy Institute	<i>Progressive</i>	11.10	4,939,243	2.25
7	Family Research Council	Conservative	19.00	8,878,019	2.14
8	New America Foundation	<i>Centrist</i>	4.95	2,888,727	1.71
9	Heritage Foundation	Conservative	54.50	34,249,890	1.59
10	Manhattan Institute	Conservative	11.00	8,328,711	1.32

Source: *Alexa.com and author's calculations, see appendix.*

<sup>4</sup> Website usage is expressed as numbers of users per million (daily reach) as determined by Alexa.com. For example, the Center for American Progress's reach is 38. This means that if you took a sample of one million Internet users, you would find on average that 38 of them visit CAP's website. Daily reach is calculated as an average over a three-month time period ending on September 13, 2005.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of their relative impact per budget dollar, the evidence suggests that progressive think tanks are far more efficient than their conservative counterparts, both in the media and on the Internet. However, in both cases, conservative think tanks have more absolute impact because of their funding advantage. A simple extrapolation would imply that the impact of progressive think tanks would vastly exceed the impact of conservative think tanks if progressive and center-left institutions received comparable funding. Of course, it is possible that the relative inefficiency of conservative think tanks is in part a function of their size. In this case, the smaller progressive think tanks would become less efficient if they grew as large as their conservative counterparts.

It is also true that there are other measures of a think tank's impact on public discourse. Some think tanks may focus their efforts on directly influencing political figures, rather than the public at large. Measuring media citations and Internet usage will not, of course, pick up this form of influence. However, our analysis suggests that a major factor limiting the influence of progressive think tanks is their funding disadvantage relative to conservative think tanks. On objective measures, the progressive think tanks are clearly far more efficient.

## Appendix

**Media Citations** –The number of media citations for 2004 was taken from the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting's report "*Right, Center Think Tanks Still Most Quoted*," EXTRA!, May-June 2005, available at: <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2534> FAIR used Nexis to determine media citations.

**Internet Reach** – Internet reach was taken from daily reach statistics found on Alexa.com.

**Think Tank Budgets** – FY2003 budgets are defined as the total organization expenses listed in the tax forms filed by each think tank. Tax forms for two of the institutions were not available (Hoover Institution and Institute for International Economics), so we used approximate budget information provided by their websites. FY2004 expenses were not available for most of the think tanks in FAIR's study, so this analysis used fiscal year 2003.

**Appendix Table 1  
Media Citations Per Dollar (2004)**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Political Orientation</b>	<b>Total Citations<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>FY03 Budget (Dollars)</b>	<b>Citations per \$10,000</b>
1	Center for Economic and Policy Research	<i>Progressive</i>	283	801,906	3.53
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8	Family Research Council	Conservative	914	8,878,019	1.03
9	New America Foundation	<i>Centrist</i>	289	2,888,727	1.00
10	Center for Strategic and International Studies	Conservative	1,873	20,292,732	0.92
11	Heritage Foundation	Conservative	3,114	34,249,890	0.91
12	Council on Foreign Relations	<i>Centrist</i>	2,265	29,650,900	0.76
13	Institute for International Economics	<i>Centrist</i>	483	7,000,000*	0.69*
14	Inter-American Dialogue	<i>Centrist</i>	281	4,168,094	0.67
15	National Center for Policy Analysis	Conservative	287	4,556,452	0.63
16	Washington Institute for Near East Policy	Center-Right	356	5,669,366	0.63
17	Manhattan Institute	Conservative	516	8,328,711	0.62
18	Center on Budget and Policy Priorities	<i>Progressive</i>	428	8,213,458	0.52
19	Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies	<i>Progressive</i>	305	5,785,404	0.52
20	Hudson Institute	Conservative	388	7,654,419	0.51
21	Public Policy Institute of California	<i>Centrist</i>	587	15,274,220	0.38
22	Hoover Institution	Conservative	1,000	32,400,000*	0.31*
23	Urban Institute	<i>Center-Left</i>	991	77,264,462	0.13
24	RAND Corporation	Center-Right	1,694	202,989,063	0.08
25	Carnegie Endowment	<i>Centrist</i>	1,399	232,613,214	0.06

\* Approximate

<sup>5</sup> Media citations for 2004 determined by Michael Dolney of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), using Nexis, available at <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2534>

**Appendix Table 2  
Website Usage Per Dollar (June-September 2005)**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Political Orientation</b>	<b>Website Usage<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>FY03 Budget (Dollars)</b>	<b>Website usage per \$1,000,000</b>
1	Center for American Progress	<i>Center-Left</i>	38.00	2,943,509	12.91
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10	Manhattan Institute	Conservative	11.00	8,328,711	1.32
11	American Enterprise Institute	Conservative	25.50	19,324,795	1.32
12	Center on Budget and Policy Priorities	<i>Progressive</i>	10.10	8,213,458	1.23
13	Institute for International Economics	<i>Centrist</i>	6.00	7,000,000*	0.86*
14	Center for Strategic and International Studies	Conservative	17.50	20,292,732	0.86
15	Washington Institute for Near East Policy	Center-Right	4.35	5,669,366	0.77
16	Council on Foreign Relations	<i>Centrist</i>	22.00	29,650,900	0.74
17	Hudson Institute	Conservative	4.30	7,654,419	0.56
18	Brookings Institution	<i>Centrist</i>	11.00	36,393,857	0.30
19	RAND Corporation	Center-Right	44.50	202,989,063	0.22
20	Urban Institute	<i>Center-Left</i>	12.50	77,264,462	0.16
21	Inter-American Dialogue	<i>Centrist</i>	0.45	4,168,094	0.11
22	Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies	<i>Progressive</i>	0.45	5,785,404	0.08
23	Public Policy Institute of California	<i>Centrist</i>	1.00	15,274,220	0.07
24	Carnegie Endowment	<i>Centrist</i>	12.00	232,613,214	0.05
25	Hoover Institution	Conservative	0.65	32,400,000*	0.02*

\* Approximate

<sup>6</sup> Website usage is expressed as numbers of users per million (daily reach) as determined by Alexa.com. For example, the Center for American Progress's reach is 38. This means that if you took a sample of one million Internet users, you would find on average that 38 of them visit CAP's website. Daily reach is calculated as an average over a three-month time period ending on September 13, 2005.