U.S. and German Think Tanks in Comparative Perspective

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Independent non-profit policy research institutes, commonly known as think tanks, are almost exclusively privately funded and are very visible in the U.S. public. By contrast, their German peers enjoy mainly public government funding, but are far less noticeable in the process of public policy making. This and further puzzling observations pose two practically as well as academically relevant research questions: What causes think tanks' different organizational and strategic patterns and how does it influence their behavior? Two main hypotheses are tested to answer the questions: Firstly, despite a clear trend of internationalization, think tanks remain nested in their institutional, legal, funding, labor, media, intellectual, and increasingly competitive think tank environment(s) and employ different and changing strategies to cope with and impact their changing marketplace(s) of ideas and resources. Moreover, and secondly, not only from a cross-national comparative perspective, but also within a given national environment, (different types of) think tanks are settled in their distinct niches in the marketplace(s) of ideas and resources. It is necessary to comparatively analyze a wide range of different think tanks in the U.S. and Germany to operationalize these hypotheses. In order to collect the quantitative and qualitative data to support the theses, several methods needed to be applied: participant observation, a comprehensive survey among 428 think tanks, and in-depth interviews with the heads of the top 41 organizations in both countries. Combining a quantitative focus and in-depth perspectives from people in charge of determining the strategic orientation of think tanks in both countries, this study seeks to foster a practical and academically relevant understanding of think tanks' different ways and means of coping with and impacting their marketplaces of funding and (public) policy ideas.

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