

Don't get me wrong. There are real think tanks like RAND or RFF that produce significant reports on environmental policy issues. I always take the conclusions of these experts seriously, because they're very competent and don't have an axe to grind (unless you count being overly attached to economic analysis as a bias.)

Then there are places like the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Cato. Their basic function is to produce advocacy pieces for conservative causes. It would really be more accurate to call them advocacy shops. There's nothing inherently linked to conservatism about advocacy shops — it's just that it's easier to get funding for this kind of thing on the Right.

I'm in the business of training people to become advocates, so far be it from me to denigrate advocacy. Advocacy can expose arguments and evidence and sharpen issues. The difference is that no one thinks a lawyer's brief is supposed to be objective, and the judge always gets briefs from both sides and is expected to consider all the arguments.

Paul Krugman has a [nice description](#) of the ersatz analysis of the Heritage Foundation that applies to some other conservative "think tanks" as well:

By the way, Heritage is always like this. Whenever there's something the G.O.P. doesn't like — say, environmental protection — Heritage can be counted on to produce a report, based on no economic model anyone else recognizes, claiming that this policy would cause huge job losses. Correspondingly, whenever there's something Republicans want, like tax cuts for the wealthy or for corporations, Heritage can be counted on to claim that this policy would yield immense economic benefits.

Like litigators, the people working for these outfits may be smart and they may produce good advocacy, which may add to the debate — at least when the arguments meet professional standards (as Heritage's do not, according to Krugman). Like a lawyer's brief, their arguments should be considered for what they are worth. Their conclusions, however, should not receive the same deference as independent expert analysis.

In and of itself, the fact that an advocacy tank has produced a report in favor of a conservative position means just as little as the fact that a corporate lawyer has written a brief on behalf of a client's position — or for that matter, that the Sierra Club or the NRDC has written a report on the environmental side. The only surprise would be if that *didn't* happen in some particular case. "American Enterprise Institute endorses government regulation" has the same newsworthiness as "man bites dog" or "Sierra Club opposes environmental measure" — or, more relevantly, as "Chamber of Commerce supports

environmental protection.”

The mistake is viewing the Heritage Foundation as in some sense the counterpart of RAND, let alone the Harvard Economics Department — rather than being the pro-business counterpart of Sierra Club on environmental issues or of the AFL-CIO on labor issues. We need good advocacy in the public arena, but let’s not confuse it with independent analysis.