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Think Tank Memo

In today's political climate the need for think tanks is essential; they are extremely important parts of our society and showcase the flexibility and duality of our changing government. Think tanks serve as institutions that push for change through ideas and networks. They are generally not affiliated with a particular party or ideology and release articles containing evidence-based discussions. Some of the more established think tanks attempt to hire employees with differing ideologies and encourage them to voice their opinions and engage in productive political discourse. They don't only conduct political research, they also attempt to engage the public, help set the policy agenda, offer creative solutions to policy issues, release publications, and host conferences, seminars, and workshops. There are four different types of think tanks: ideological, specialist, state-level, and "think and do". Ideological tanks refer to organizations that support a specified or broad ideological philosophy, specialist tanks focus on specific topics of their choosing, state-level tanks are self-explanatory and "think and do" tanks are more active than traditional tanks and are similar to nongovernmental organizations.

Although think tanks can be productive and contribute to society in a positive way they can also be unproductive because policymakers are humans and are subject to acting on their own biases. As a result, they may avoid selecting evidence as a way to confirm their views and compromise

their credibility. Additionally, think tanks put a lot of emphasis on their reputations and operate and release information based on their sources of funding, because of this they are susceptible to acting on their private interests and furthering the agendas of their donors.

Cato Institute was founded in 1977 and its name derived from Cato's Letters, which were a series of essays that were written to present a vision of a society free from excessive government power. Cato is "dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace" (Cato Institute). They do not receive government funding, back political candidates nor engage in direct political activities. Their mission is to "expand civil society while reducing political society" (Cato Institute). Essentially, in a civil society, people are mostly independent and make choices about their own lives while in a political society someone else is partially or fully responsible for influencing or making those choices for the masses.

Center for American Progress was founded in 2003 as a left-leaning alternative to prominent conservative think tanks like American Heritage Foundation. They focus on improving the lives of all Americans "through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action"(Center for American Progress). They believe an effective government can be beneficial to Americans and that people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. Center for American Progress does not endorse political candidates or political parties and is privately funded. Unlike Cato, Center for American Progress is more active and has outreach organizations such as Generation Progress, which mobilize millennials and get them involved in politics. Center for American Progress mainly focuses on policy issues such as energy, health, national security, economic growth, immigration, and education.

Affordable housing has been an ongoing issue in the United States due to the rise of wages after years of stagnation. Unfortunately, wages are not rising at the same speed as home

prices and rents which leads to many people not being able to afford housing, especially in heavily urbanized areas. “Developers seeking to build apartments and houses in the most-desirable markets often face opposition or must deal with restrictive land-use regulations designed to maintain a neighborhood as-is or bar development in environmentally sensitive areas” (*Issues for debate in American public policy*). This highlights one of the biggest contributors to the lack of affordable housing – zoning. Zoning allows the local and national government to regulate and control land and property markets to ensure constructive uses of the land in the cities and surrounding areas. Both think tanks – Center for American Progress and Cato– agree that zoning has a direct effect on this problem and urge policymakers to create new policies to alleviate the issue by revising and adding improvements to the current zoning regulations. There are stark differences in the paths to take to make changes in the system; Center for American Progress has a very government involved plan while Cato adopted the laissez-faire approach and are pushing for less government intervention.

Among the various articles published by the Center for American Progress, I am focusing on two, in particular, one released in 2015 and one released in 2019. The first article discusses how important it is for policymakers to make policies that promote residential mobility and support reinvestment in racially segregated and economically impoverished neighborhoods. They offer some solutions such as using tax policies to increase the supply of rental housing, eliminating restrictive zoning, and funding the federal housing voucher program. The second article talks more about the lack of affordable housing amongst people of color. It focuses on how the evolution of racism and segregation has perpetually hindered blacks and people of color when it comes to being economically equal and having access to housing. This is because homeownership is a critical tool for wealth building and well being in the U.S.

On the other hand, Cato released a study in 2017 studying similar effects on the issue—the effects of zoning on affordable housing— but from a very different viewpoint. The data showed that the states with more restrictive zoning regulations often receive more federal funding and because of this, the researcher at Cato Institute concluded: “federal aid creates a disincentive for the states to solve their housing affordability problems by reducing regulation” (Zoning, Land-Use Planning, and Housing Affordability). He believes that by decreasing federal government spending, and involvement altogether would incentivize the states to figure out the housing affordability issue in their states on their own. He sees the importance of zoning regulations because they are there to ensure the land is being used productively and to halt overcrowding but points out all of its negative qualities such as the extremely lengthy process of getting an approval to build on certain land preventing construction companies from building houses for other residents in the city. To tackle the housing affordability problems he proposes state and local governments get rid of zoning and land– use rules, fast– track the approval process, and cut government funding.

In conclusion, housing affordability is a large issue plaguing Americans mainly due to zoning. Center for American Progress and Cato Institute both agreed that zoning is one of, if not the largest contributor to the rising home and rent prices. Center for American Progress discusses the importance of government funding while Cato discusses the importance of hands–off government in the handling of an issue this grandiose. They both are discussing the same issue and essentially want the same outcomes but don’t agree on the way to get there; lack of affordable housing will remain an issue unless something is done about it not only by citizens but also by the policymakers they voted into office.

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