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Article

New Ranking, Old Mistakes – The “Global Go-To Think Tanks” Ranking 2013

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NEW RANKING, OLD MISTAKES – THE “GLOBAL GO-TO THINK TANKS” RANKING 2013

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania has presented the “Global Go-To Think Tanks” Ranking on an annual basis since 2008. This ranking, published at the end of January, is based on a survey of expert panelists, journalists, scholars, donors and participating think tanks. It claims to assess think tanks worldwide based on regional, functional and other criteria. According to its website, “The index has become the gold standard for think tanks around the world”.¹ Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010) analyse the ranking for 2009 and identify a large number of technical and functional flaws, casting doubt on the quality of the ranking. The functional critiques in particular were renewed by Wohlrabe (2012) for the ranking in 2011. In the wake of the publication of the current ranking for 2013 on January 22nd, we are taking this opportunity to inspect the quality and validity of the new ranking.² In short, the critical points raised with regard to the 2011 survey remain relevant in light of the fact that neither the nomination nor the selection procedure has been changed since then; and only the categories have been re-adjusted. The ranking’s results should therefore continue to be interpreted with great caution. The first part of this paper introduces the methodology used in the ranking and the second part highlights its shortcomings.

Methodology

The ranking is based on a three-stage process. In the first stage, the call for the open nomination round was sent to 6,826 think tanks, as well as “thousands”³ of journalists, donors and policymakers (p. 11). Each participant was encouraged to nominate between five and 25 think tanks for each of the 46 categories. In the second stage, a further survey of all persons and organisations was carried out, whereby only think tanks could be ranked that obtained five or more nominations in the first round. At the third and last stage, the lists were

shared with expert panellists, who had also corrected the nominations in the round before. The expert panel was composed of 793 not clearly defined experts “for all the regional and functional research categories” (p. 11). After the integration of the expert panellists’ feedback, the final lists were generated and published. Following statistics on representativeness, the extent of the nomination process is reported:

- 6,826 think tanks from 182 countries were invited to participate in the process;
- 1,947 individuals from 120 countries participated in the nominations and rankings process;
- Think tanks were nominated, and subsequently ranked, in 47 categories;
- 2,265 ballots were cast over two voting rounds;
- 52,000 votes were cast over two voting rounds;⁴
- 171 think tanks were nominated as the world’s top think tank.

Critiques

In general terms a great deal of the important information that would be necessary to evaluate the quality of the study is missing. It is not clear, for instance, how the 52,000 votes are distributed between the different stages.⁵ Furthermore, there is no information on how many votes are cast per category and per think tank. There is also a lack of information on the regional vote distribution over continents that would make it possible to judge the regional bias mentioned by the Think Tank and Civil Societies Program itself (p. 9ff).

Wohlrabe (2012) criticised intransparent and partly contradictory statements on the number of participants. The exact number of participants also differs in this year’s ranking: in one instance “over 1,950” (p. 11) are cited, while another reference is made to “1,947” (p. 12). Both of these numbers are all the more remarkable, as they are found in exactly the same context in the previous year’s report. Equally, the term “100s of think tanks” (p. 11) is also very loose and open to interpretation. Despite an “increasingly global reach” (p. 11), the response rate of less than ten percent among think tanks is quite low.⁶ This includes a decreasing representativeness. The number of 2,265 votes cast (allocated to two

¹ See <http://gotothinktank.com/the-2013-global-go-to-think-tank-index-ggtti/>.

² The current ranking can be downloaded at www.gotothinktank.com; here and hereafter, as far as not differently noted, we always quote from the “2013 Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report” of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

³ A certain or more specific number is not announced.

⁴ The authors asked the editors how the votes are divided. At the time of writing they had not yet received any responses to their questions.

⁵ In the 2012 ranking, 57,018 votes were received, corresponding to a decline of 5,000 votes.

⁶ Assuming 1,947 participants, a number of between 609 and 614 participating think tanks can be calculated.

voting rounds), combined with 1,947 participants, implies that only 318 persons voted for both of the rounds and 1,629 for only one round.

The number of 52,000 votes, which are allocated to two voting rounds, also raises several questions. As already mentioned, no information on the exact vote distribution over the two rounds is available. In fact, it seems that voting parity does not exist in any of the 46 categories, because no think tank has to share its rank with another one. This, in turn, implies, however, that the votes for each think tank in the second voting round need to differ from each other by a minimum of one. For all of the 46 categories – the different length of the categories is taken into account – the minimum quantity of votes is necessarily 81,455, which is distinctly undercut by 52,000 (see Table 1).⁷ This calculation does not include votes for the first nomination round. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that all think tanks only won their ranking places by an advantage of one vote. Since a linear distribution of votes is highly improbable, the true amount of votes required has to be much higher. The insufficient number of votes therefore casts doubt on the accomplishment of the ranking.

Other faults found concern the power of the expert panel, and especially the fact that changes in the ranking by the expert panellists are not explicitly excluded (Wohlrabe 2012). Identifying omissions or irregularities by the expert panel might be useful after the first round, but it is not reasonable which “serious errors” (p. 12) after the second and last voting round can be found and corrected. In addition to the insufficient number of votes, we suspect that intransparent and inappropriate adjustments and modifications occurred.

As in previous years, it may prove almost impossible to create a ranking of this magnitude based on quantitative indicators due to a lack of information.⁸ Without an enormous time exposure, an economist, for example, is not able to assess either scientific or political think tanks worldwide. This may explain why, on average, only 23 votes per ballot were sent back, even although a far higher number is allowed.⁹ A decreasing amount of votes is associated with declining representativeness. Even within the same branch, it is often impossible to give a comprehensive response according to the nomi-

⁷ This calculation assumes that, for example, for the ranking worldwide with 150 ranked think tanks, the first rank obtains 150 votes, the second 149, et cetera.

⁸ The quantitative criteria are quite similar to those in 2011 (see Wohlrabe 2012).

⁹ At the first stage a maximum of 25 think tanks can be nominated, at the second stage several can be nominated for each of 46 categories.

nation and ranking criteria. How can any external individual assess, for example, the “level, diversity and stability of funding” of other organisations or “listserv and web site dominance” (p. 14ff)? Most of the participants may also be unaware of the “key contacts in the policy academic community” (p. 15) enjoyed by institutes in foreign countries.

Moreover, some of the category classifications such as, for example, the category “Top Domestic Economic Policy Think Tanks” are difficult to understand. Due to the large number of countries with all their specific domestic economies, scarcely anybody can realistically be expected to be in a position to evaluate the quality of all of these institutes with respect to their domestic economic situation. Two possible conclusions, however, can be drawn. Firstly, participants only rank those think tanks on which they have access to reliable information; therefore, the amount of votes and representativeness decrease and the ranking will be biased. It should be assumed that some think tanks are better according to objective criteria, but are not ranked because participants do not know enough about them. This selection bias could potentially be resolved by drawing upon a suffi-

Figure 1

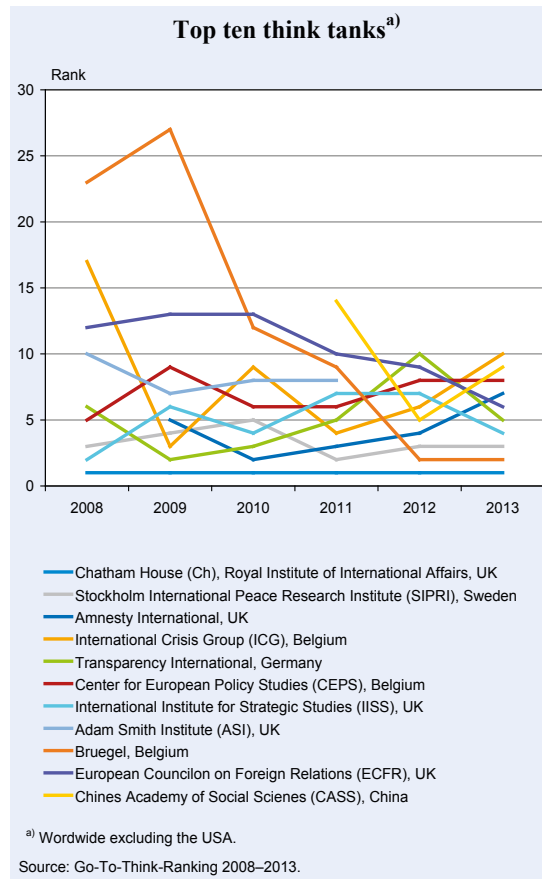


Table 1

Global Go-To Think Tank-Ranking voting			
Amount of ranked think tanks within one category	Amount of rankings with certain amount of ranked think tanks	Minimum votes per ranking	Minimum votes total
10	1	55	55
20	1	210	210
25	1	325	325
30	7	465	3,255
35	1	630	630
40	5	820	4,100
45	2	1,035	2,070
50	7	1,275	8,925
55	1	1,540	1,540
60	7	1,830	12,810
65	2	2,145	4,290
70	2	2,485	4,970
75	2	2,850	5,700
80	5	3,240	16,200
100	1	5,050	5,050
150	1	11,325	11,325
Sum	46	35,280	81,455
votes cast			52,000
Difference			-29,455

Source: Global Go-To Think Tank-Ranking 2013, calculations of Ifo Institute.

ciently large sample. Nonetheless, the information in the report does not support this implication. The same problem occurs, as mentioned above, when individuals judge think tanks from other fields of research. The ranking results may also be biased if certain subjects answer more frequently and are overrepresented. Secondly, the lack of information leads to a perception-ranking and Seiler's and Wohlrabe's (2010) critique finds its application. Hence, only think tanks should be allowed to participate that are able to respond comprehensively for all nominated organisations.

Among these rankings, some inconsistencies are worth noting. At a glance, in Table 2 (p. 27ff) "Top Think Tanks Worldwide (Non-US)", the "Bonn International Center of Conversation (BICC)" is ranked 70th. In Table 3, which includes US institutes, (p. 30ff) "Top Think Tanks Worldwide (US and non-US)" the institute moves up to 57, although 11 US institutes are listed among the top 30. Thus, the BICC was able to move

up 24 places compared to its non-US competitors. Examples of this type are often found in the report and indicate the inconsistency of answering-behaviour.

In addition, some technical faults can be identified. In Table 45 (p. 100ff), where "Think Tanks with the Most Significant Impact on Public Policy" are listed, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) is ranked 22nd as well as 28th. It is completely unclear why the International Center of Human Development from Armenia is found on the ranking "Top Think Tanks in Central and Eastern Europe" (Table 11, p. 45ff), although nine other Armenian institutes are listed at "Top Think Tanks in Central Asia" (Table 8, p. 41ff).

Development over time

Like Wohlrabe (2012), we would like to take a look at the development over time of the "Global Go-To Think Tank" Ranking. Figure 1 shows the Top Ten Think tanks (non-US) since 2008. It is notable that its composition within the last two years is the same and the order of the top three did not change either. This low level of fluctuation may be due to two different reasons: either the best ranked institutes are objectively the best; or there is a self-amplifying process over time due to the increasing prominence gained by an institute after being ranked at the top, which leads to more nominations. Publishing the amount of nominations over time of the top think tanks and their relative advantage to these think tanks would be quite helpful. Without this data, every statement is only speculative.

In a second step, we would like to draw a comparison with the "Global Go-to Think Tank" Ranking and a quantitative-based ranking like RePEc, which generates a global ranking among economic departments and institutes and aggregates 35 output-indicators. These indicators include the number of publications (weighted and unweighted), as well as the number of

Figure 2

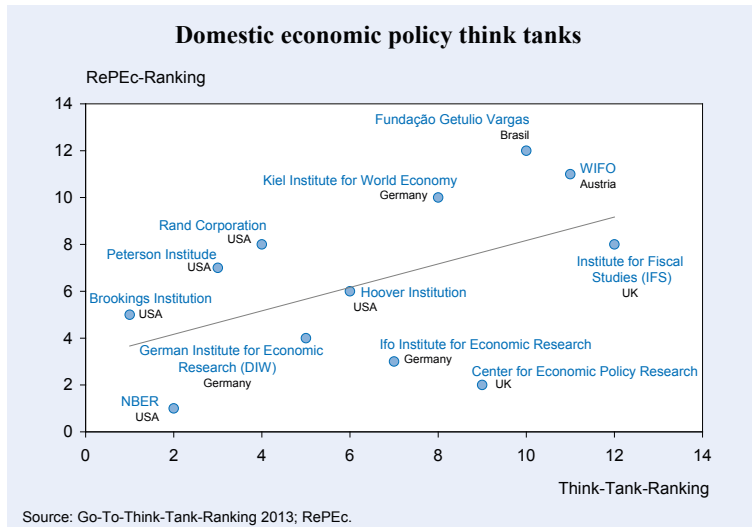
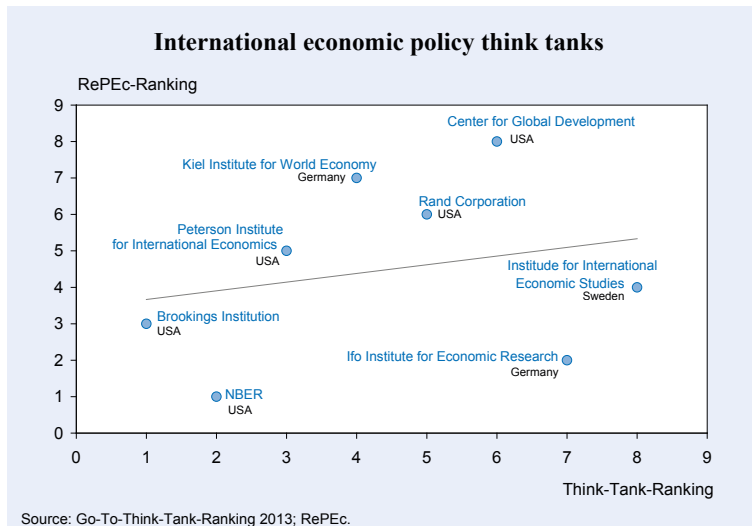


Figure 3



citations and downloads.¹⁰ Figure 2 illustrates a scatterplot with rescaled ranking positions of the category “Top Domestic Economic Policy Think Tanks” and the RePEc ranking position. Initially, it is conspicuous that among the top 80 of the “Global Go-To Think Tank” Ranking only 12 institutions are ranked by RePEc. There may be different reasons for this. On the one hand, there are some top think tanks that are not listed by the Think-Tank Ranking such as, for example, the World Bank (3rd at RePEc), International Monetary Fund (5th at RePEc) or Central Banks. These institutions produce a lot of highly relevant output, which is demanded according to the output criteria. On the other hand, think tanks listed by the “Global Go-To Think Tank” Ranking are not ranked at the RePEc list, because

¹⁰ See Seiler and Wohlrabe (2012) for a more detailed description of the RePEc Ranking methodology.

it only shows the top five percent of over 6,300 institutions and departments. Therefore, Bruegel is only found in the top eight percent in RePEc, but comes No. eight in the Think-Tank Ranking. This demonstrates the large differences that can occur between a quantitative ranking and a survey that is announced to be based on quantitative factors. The high variance in Figure 2 clarifies those differences. Figure 3 shows the same relation between the RePEc-Ranking and the category “Top International Economic Policy Think Tanks”. In that case, only eight institutions can be compared with each other. The variance is still greater and the correlation smaller. Basically, a weak positive relation between both of the rankings is still visible.

Conclusions

As pointed out, the think tank ranking fails in terms of its own ambitious claim. Many of the facts that would be needed to prove the quality and significance of the ranking are inappropriate, unclear or missing. The methodology of the survey and the in-

sufficient number of responses mean that the ranking is potentially biased and leads us to suspect that ex post adjustments have been applied. The interpretations and implications of this ranking therefore need to be approached with extreme caution.

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