

**Alejandro Chafuen** Contributor*I cover think tanks, scholars, and champions of innovation.*

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The Top Free-Market Institutes: 2014 Rankings

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The 2014 think tank rankings are out. Thousands of policy experts voted for their favorite groups. Over 6,600 groups were listed and less than 300 qualified among the top. Free-market think tanks again got a share of the vote.

[Cato](#) was ranked higher among U.S. free-market think tanks, just before the completion of the rankings. But, when adding all areas and topics ranked by the [2014 Global Go To Think Tank Index GGTTI](#), [Heritage](#) came on top with 21 mentions, followed by Cato 20, and the [American Enterprise Institute](#) (AEI) with 16. Outside the United States, the [Fraser Institute](#) (Canada) is again the leader with 18 mentions, followed by [Libertad y Desarrollo](#), in Chile, with 13.

For some analysts free-market think tanks have been a key instrument of the “[Masters of the Universe](#)” (those who want to impose their views). Other see think tanks occupying such a [unique place](#) in society that their influence can’t be neglected. The 2014 GGTTI provides a picture of think tanks around the globe and tries to stay above ideological disputes. It includes abundant material to continue the discussion about the forces that try to influence and determine public policy.

The index, compiled by Dr. James McGann at the University of Pennsylvania, is a collaborative effort. Three thousand plus scholars, journalists, policymakers, directors and donors, from around the world helped select and vote for their favorite—and most effective— organizations. In addition, over 1,950 area and regional specialists provided valuable insights and assistance. This year there were 49 categories.

[Brookings](#) again won the main award. Some of its work, like their Latin American research which is handled mostly by [CERES](#) in Uruguay, can qualify as pro free-market. Yet Brookings prefers to be seen as neutral. This

article will be similar to my [2014](#), and [2013](#) versions and will only list think tanks that have missions that focus on the promotion and understanding of the benefits of free enterprise and the market process.

Last year the independence of Brookings was called into question as it was revealed that it was receiving considerable sums from foreign government sources. The criticism did not lower their rank. A large number of foreign think tanks also get support from the U.S. government. So, the attacks did not achieve much traction. The U.S. government is not alone, several European countries provide money to foundations which, in turn, conduct programs that benefit foreign think tanks. Free-market think tanks are also beneficiaries of these funds.

I mentioned last year that other organizations have tried to develop competing indices, such as the [Center for Global Development](#). But those efforts also had their weaknesses, and have not been continued.

Although the rankings get most of the media attention, some of the best aspects of this publication appear in the introductory chapters. This time it focuses on an analysis of global trends and new challenges for think tank. It should be mandatory reading for all those interested in the work of think tanks, which means everyone interested in public policy. The table below lists the main points.

Current Trends in Think Tanks	Emerging Issues Facing Think Tanks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Globalization * Growth of international actors * Democratization * Demands for independent information and analysis * Big data and supercomputers * Increased complexity of policy issues * The Information Age and the rate of technological change * Increasingly open debate about government decision making * Global "hactivist", anarchist, and populist movements * Global structural adjustment * Economic crisis and political paralysis * Policy tsunamis * Increasing political polarization * Short termism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Dramatic shifts in funding patterns * Increased specialization * Increased competition * Influence and independence * Outputs vs. inputs * Phantom NGO think tanks * Hybrid organizations * Impact of the internet, new media, social networking. * Action vs. ideas * Greater emphasis on external relations and marketing * Going global * Leadership and managing tensions * Decentralization of power * Blurring lines between think tanks and journalism * Global Gridlock * Crisis Fatigue

Highlights of the 2014 ranking

After the Fraser Institute and Libertad y Desarrollo, the foreign think tanks with more mentions are: [CIDAC](#), Mexico (11), [IMANI](#), Ghana (10), and the [Centro de Divulgación del Conocimiento Económico](#) (CEDICE), in Venezuela (9).

Cato (16th), Heritage (17th), Fraser (19th) and AEI (24th), ranked very close in the overall index. If we factor their rankings per budget, Fraser would win hands down. With \$10 million in income, Fraser is roughly 1/3 the size of Cato and 1/8 of Heritage.

Free-market think tanks, conservative, libertarian, and classical liberal all scored very well in social policy research and advocacy. Fraser, Cato, Acton, AEI, and Heritage scored closed to the top. Outside North America, [Israel Center for Social and Economic Progress](#) and [Civitas](#) in the U.K., were the top scorers among free-market groups.

Free-Market Think Tank	Mentions	Region	Top ranked free-market think tank
Heritage Foundation	21	United States	Cato Institute
Cato	20	World (non-US)	Fraser Institute (Canada)
Fraser Institute (Canada)	18	Central and South America	Centro de Estudios Públicos (Chile)
American Enterprise Institute (AEI)	16	Mexico	CIDAC
Libertad y Desarrollo (Chile)	13	Western Europe	Adam Smith Institute (U.K.)
CIDAC (Mexico)	11	South East Asia	Centre for Independent Studies (Australia)
IMANI (Ghana)	10	India, Japan, Korea	Centre for Civil Society (India)
CEDICE (Venezuela), Atlas Network	9	Middle East	Association for Liberal Thinking (Turkey)
Adam Smith Institute (U.K.), Unirule (China)	8	Sub-Saharan	IMANI (Ghana)
Hoover Institution (Stanford University)	7	Central and Eastern Europe	Prague Security Studies Institute (Czech)

An increasing number of free-market think tanks are conducting advocacy campaigns. At least 12 out of 75 scored well, this time with Heritage ahead of its peers. With most organizations competing to have the best conference, the rankings list the [Mont Pelerin Society](#) meetings on top, followed by the [Acton Institute](#) (with its [Acton University](#)) and then the [Atlas Network](#) (which hosts a well-attended Liberty Forum). Atlas also scored on top as the best managed free-market think tank.

Free-Market Think Tanks absent in key areas

As in previous years, there are very few free-market thinks appearing in the rankings in areas of extreme importance. On environment, only two (out of 70), [PERC](#) and [CEI](#). On energy one (out of 20), AEI, and on education, only three (out of 50), and a similar weak performance on think tanks with some focus in science and policy.

There is a growing number of university-based think tanks and centers, but I was able to find only two who are overtly pro free-market, the [Hoover Institution](#), at Stanford University, and the [Mercatus Center](#), at George Mason University. This despite that according to Dr. McGann, over half of the think tanks in the world are affiliated with a university. In future rankings, I expect that we will see additional free-market centers, such as the [Free-Market Institute](#) at Texas Tech University, or the [Navarra Center for International Development](#), appearing in this field of the Go To Ranking.

When I began working for Antony [Fisher](#) in 1985, the [Institute of Economic Affairs](#), IEA (U.K.), which he founded, was the leading think tank (in 2014 IEA had 4 mentions, up from 1 in 2012) and [ILD](#) (Perú) was the rising star (2 mentions, same as 2012). [Fisher listed 27 free-market think tanks](#) in his Atlas network. They had a combined budget of \$7 million. As the GGTTI shows, much has changed. Free-market think tanks approach the 500 mark, and I estimate the combined budget at close to \$1 billion. To influence their respective civil societies they will have to continue enhancing their operations and adapt to the market. Indices such as the GGTTI will have to be perfected and those of us in the industry should not only learn from it but also provide advice, constructive criticism, and collaboration.

Anaïs Reig conducted research for this article

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