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# State Public Policy Research Centers Survive the Years, Weather the Financial Storms

by Jack Betts

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**“T**hink tanks are an American phenomenon. No other country accords such significance to private institutions designed to influence public decisions.” So writes Gregg Easterbrook, national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, in a January 1986 article on national think tanks affecting domestic and foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the Brookings Institution, established in 1920, these organizations all along the political spectrum have been shaping national policy for more than 65 years.

But while these institutions have commanded most of the public notice—and more of the funding available for nonprofit research—a healthy number of *state-level* policy organizations have been at work just as long, if not longer. In fact, one such group, the Citizens Research Council of Michigan, founded in 1916, has been hewing away at the public policy jungle for 70 years, and others were formed in the Thirties and Forties. Still others, like the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, were born of the Seventies, but all have one common theme: researching and gathering data on state and local governments to educate the public about how governments go about their decision-making—and how well.

More than two dozen centers—some nonprofit private institutions, some related to universities and some acting as foundations—are at work analyzing and influencing the way their states and

communities are governed. But measuring the impact of a group's work in the public policy field is more difficult than correctly guessing the number of managers George Steinbrenner will hire to direct the New York Yankees this season.

At an October 1983 conference of major public policy center officials, sponsored by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation in Little Rock, Arkansas, participants concluded there was no easy way—or quick way—to measure a state-level think tank's impact upon governmental decision making. As one speaker put it, “The process of change is a long, hard slogging in the trenches to put the information out there, wondering if anyone ever pays any attention to it, and it is a slow incremental process. It's not an earthquake.”

Perhaps not an earthquake, but state policy research centers *have*, over time, moved legislative mountains. Cases in point? For instance, the Wyoming Taxpayers Association believes its reports have saved taxpayers \$10 million in property taxes. The Washington Research Council's reports have led to changes in industrial insurance laws. The Public Affairs Review Council of Louisiana's research has led to reforms in budget procedures and in campaign finance.

Still other organizations see their missions—and their accomplishments—in even more

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intangible terms. The California Center and the Center for Analysis of Public Issues in New Jersey both view their successes as contributing to the body of information available about state and local issues. California Center President Tom Hoeber views it this way: "Our goal is citizen education; we do not view passage of legislation as our mission and we do not track the impact our articles have."

Adds Rick Sinding of the New Jersey group, "Our magazine articles add to the body of knowledge on any given subject, but whether they directly influence decision-making is difficult to say. For instance, did our article on divestiture inspire Gov. Tom Kean to sign a divestiture bill? Or did (South African Prime Minister) Botha's speech? Or political pressure? Or all of the above?"

Unlike their well-known brethren on the national level, state policy research organizations are far less identifiable by political or partisan intent. The Brookings Institution, for example, is known for its relatively liberal positions; the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, on the other hand, are identifiably conservative and make no bones about their political agendas.

But describing state-level policy groups in similar fashion is difficult to do. Because most of these groups are private, nonprofit organizations under the U.S. tax code, they go out of their way to avoid being identified with a political party or with a partisan viewpoint. In most cases, their boards of directors reflect a bipartisanship politically as well as a cross-section of business, academia, communications, and other vocations. Most state-level policy centers examine the political context of issues, but few approach their work from an ideological bias.

"The fact is that much of what state governments are about does not leave time or space for this sort of ideological argumentation," says Thad Beyle, professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and chairman of the board of directors of the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research.

To determine how other state-level public policy research groups are faring under today's financial and operational obstacles, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research recently surveyed the known existing groups aimed at assessing state policy-making. Results arrived from across the country, and represented a broad diversity of organizational structure, financing, and production. Some were private, nonprofit groups like the N.C. Center, examining policy in all areas

of state government. Many more were private, nonprofit taxpayer associations, focusing more on state tax policy and whether taxpayers were getting their money's worth. Others were related to universities or foundations, and one started as a nonprofit organization but converted to a for-profit status. Still other groups chose not to respond to the survey.

While all these groups have similar functions, each has a different emphasis. All share the goal of educating the public about governmental policy-making, but each goes about the job in different fashion. Some rely on magazines but publish government directories or produce public television shows. Others publish summaries of research in a newsletter or pamphlet. Some centers issue book-length reports, while others hold annual or quarterly conferences. Some engage in research for hire under contracts, while some concentrate more on politics. Others seek to perform arduous, nitty-gritty research on the arcane details of how a government works. Some perform almost all these functions; others, only one.

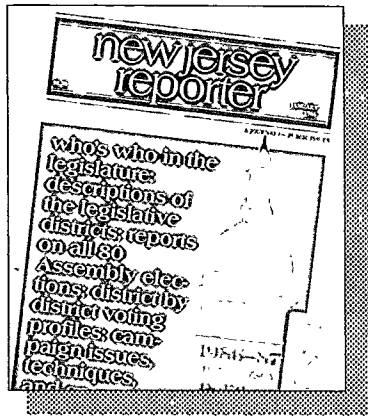
Common to all was a central theme: examining how well government meets the needs of the state and its people. This issue of *Insight* takes a look at a representative sampling of the five types of state-level policy organizations and what they do.

## The Broad-Based, Nonprofit Policy Research Movement

**T**HE N.C. CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH: Established in 1977 in Raleigh, the N.C. Center's goals are to evaluate state programs and policies; to educate the public about how state government works and raise issues for public debate; to monitor the N.C. legislature and enhance its accountability to the public; and to conduct research on public policy issues of statewide importance.

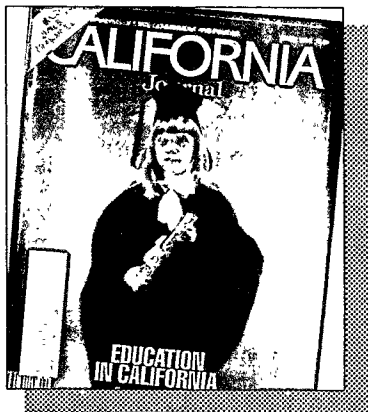


NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.



Among the results of the Center's efforts are adoption of a state civil rights act for the handicapped following a 1983 report on the problems of the mentally and physically impaired; consideration of legislation to abolish boards, commissions, and councils in the executive branch following a 1985 report urging the elimination of 98 such boards; adoption of a statewide teacher certification regulation following a Center report on out-of-field teaching in grades 7-12; and a new state basic education plan standardizing curriculum and addressing funding disparities among state school districts, as the Center had recommended.

The Center is one of the few nonprofit groups to publish a regular magazine, on the one hand, and to engage in detailed research projects and periodic seminars. *North Carolina Insight* magazine, which began publication on a quarterly basis in 1978, has a circulation ranging from 1,500 to 2,500, depending upon the issue. Its main audiences are the Center's 600 regular members, who contribute \$24 per year, more than 200 policymakers and elected officials (including the 170 members of the General Assembly), and about 200 newspaper reporters and editors and broadcast journalists.



The N.C. Center, steered by a Board of Directors of 35 persons, has a regular staff of eight persons, employs four to six interns in the summer as well as during the school year, and operates on an annual budget of about \$385,000. The bulk of the budget (63 percent, down from 90 percent in 1981) comes from two North Carolina foundations, the Z. Smith Reynolds and the Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations, while the remainder comes from 84 corporate contributors, 14 individual donors, 600 members, sales, and advertising. In recent years, its research reports have included *Article II: A Guide to the N.C. Legislature* (including the Center's most controversial product, effectiveness rankings of individual legislators based on biennial surveys of legislators, lobbyists, and capital correspondents); a series of reports on the For-Profit Hospital Movement in North Carolina; and *Boards, Commissions and Councils in the Executive Branch of North Carolina State Government*, a 600-page report (see article on page 2 for more). The Center also engages in annual seminars and symposia. In 1985, the Center held a seminar on campaign finance in the state, focusing on the 1984 races for governor and U.S. Senator. Nationally syndicated columnist David Broder of *The Washington Post*, Democratic pollster Peter Hart, and Republican campaign consultant Lance Tarrance were among the main speakers at the event. Another Center product, *North Carolina Focus*, a collection of articles on the workings of state government, is used as a textbook in public schools.

**NEW JERSEY—THE CENTER FOR ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC ISSUES:** Like the N.C. Center, this group's best-known product is its magazine, *New Jersey Reporter*. The N.J. Center originally was established in 1970 to produce research reports as well, and early publications included reports on bail bondsmen and auto insurance. But the group found more of a market for 10 magazine issues a year and does not now attempt to produce periodic research reports. Directed by a board of 15 members, the Center has an annual budget of \$225,000, nearly half of it from foundations. Corporate givers donate about 21 percent of the center's budget, and subscribers provide another 19 percent.

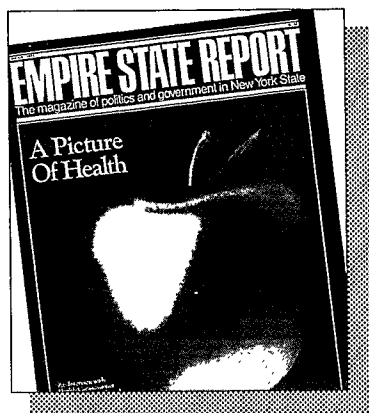
With a staff of six persons, *New Jersey Reporter* has a circulation of about 2,500. The magazine staff also produces an annual government directory in its magazine, appears regularly each month on public television on a program called "Front Page: New Jersey," and sponsors annual conferences and symposia. Recent seminars were

on "Hazardous-Waste and Solid-Waste Facility Siting" and "Urban Revitalization."

**THE CALIFORNIA CENTER:** This group has had more success at reaching a mass audience with its monthly magazine of politics and government, *California Journal*. With a staff of 13, plus up to four interns and a 15-member board, the California Center (created in 1970) operates on an enviable budget of about \$900,000 annually. Unlike many of its sister organizations in the nonprofit corporation world, the California Center is nearly self-sustaining. It receives less than 6 percent of its budget from foundation, corporate, or individual givers. Relying on the largest population of any state in the union (25 million), the Center receives half its annual budget from subscribers (18,000 paid circulation, which the Center translates into about 55,000 readers), 18 percent from printing publications for others, 17 percent from advertising, and 13 percent from book sales. The group also gets a healthy chunk of income from an annual fund-raising event, the California Roast, at which Golden State politicians are skewered, basted and turned slowly over glowing rhetorical coals during an evening of merriment. Last year, the California Center grossed \$25,000 from its weenie roast.

In addition to its 12 magazines each year, the California Center publishes a monthly newsletter, "Newsfile." It also issues reports and texts, such as a biennial *Almanac of California Government and Politics*, a *California Government and Politics Annual*, and a yearly directory of legislative, executive, and judicial officials that sells up to 80,000 copies. The Center also produces weekly and monthly programs over public television, and is planning appearances on cable television. Last fall, the Center also began monthly seminars on areas of public interest, such as the state budget and the legislative process. For the future, the Center has ambitious plans for cable TV coverage of the Capitol and for expanding publishing.

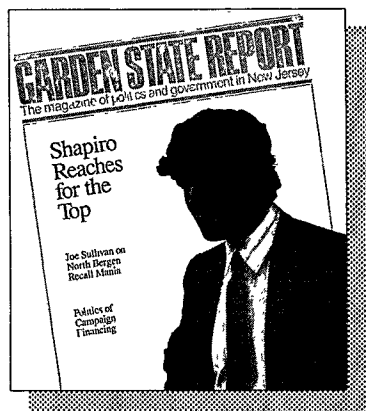
These policy centers share common strengths and weaknesses. They provide more in-depth research generally than other media organizations in their states, and they seek to illuminate issues that are rarely addressed in the daily press. Yet they constantly fight the battle of the budget, and fundraising is a constant concern. Their risks are greater. For instance, in a lean fundraising year, such centers must consider cutting their products or their staff. But their independence allows them to develop a greater knowledge of government and how the politics and programs work in a certain policy area.

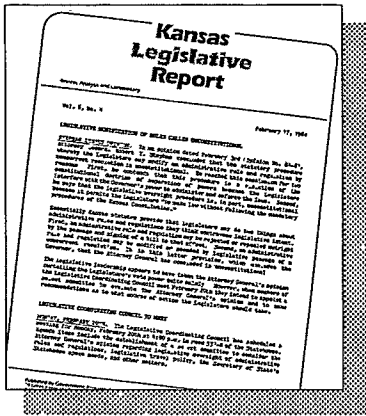


## The For-Profit Public Policy Business

**S**TATE REPORT NETWORK: New Jersey and California both are no doubt concerned by competition from an unlikely source, a previous cousin in the nonprofit policy field. When it first began publication in 1974, *Empire State Report* was produced by a private, nonprofit corporation. Later it became associated with the New York State Legislative Institute at Baruch College of the City University of New York. In 1982, however, the magazine became a for-profit venture, aimed at a target circulation of the state's top political and governmental leaders, the financial community, labor, education, health, and the mass media. The magazine has a circulation of about 12,000, says Floyd Weintraub, president of State Report Network.

In 1985, Weintraub startled the small world of state-level public policy centers when he announced the creation of competitors for *New Jersey Reporter* and for *California Journal*. Weintraub began publishing *Garden State Report* in New Jersey last fall, and introduced *Golden State Report*

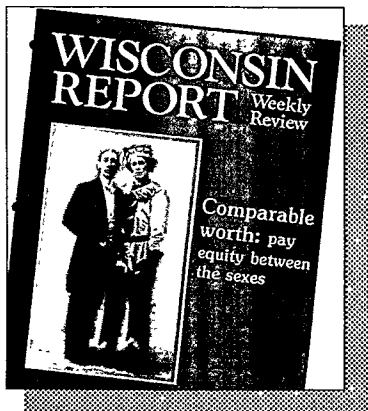




earlier this year in California after being rebuffed in his attempt to purchase outright the *California Journal*.

**GOVERNMENT RESEARCH SERVICE:** State Report Network is not the only for-profit organization at work in the public policy vineyard. Scores of consulting firms around the country engage in general and for-hire research projects. For example, Government Research Service in Topeka, Kansas opened its doors in 1978. Its staff of two produces a twice-monthly newsletter called the "Kansas Legislative Report," and an annual handbook called the *Kansas Legislative Handbook*, a periodically updated loose-leaf guide to the Kansas legislature and its members. It also organizes six seminars each year on the legislative process. The organization has also introduced a new publication called the *State Legislative Sourcebook: A Resource Guide to Legislative Information in the Fifty States*, which is marketed on a national scale.

**WISCONSIN REPORTS:** An impressive venture that began operation in 1983, Wisconsin Reports' *Weekly Review* sought to be a state-level



combination of *Congressional Quarterly* and *National Journal*. With an annual budget of \$320,000 and a staff of 12, this for-profit magazine quickly became an excellent resource—and a financial nightmare that wound up in reorganization under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Act. Publisher Rick Merrill notes that although "economic viability eluded us, the publication did achieve widespread editorial credibility." Merrill has hopes of securing the financing to resume publication of the *Weekly Review*, which has not been published since March of 1984.

The for-profit research movement has its own set of problems as it works to survive in a field where farmers who toil in the public policy earth never get rich. Publishers of policy magazines walk a very fine line in maintaining their independence, on the one hand, and in trying to put out a marketable product that people will buy and that, as in the case of State Report Network, advertisers will be willing to support. The danger is that the drive to obtain advertising and show a profit could affect either an organization's choice of topics or the independence of its research findings. The opportunity is to fill a niche in the market for those who need information on government.

## The Foundation as Policy Research Center

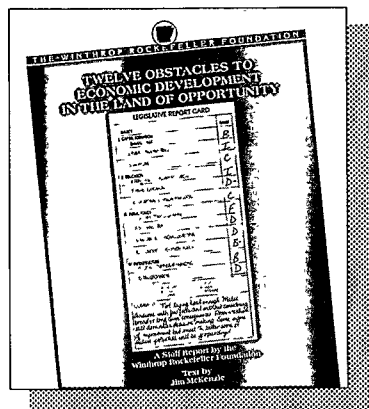
**WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION:** At the opposite end of the funding scale is the private foundation that engages in state policy research. One such example is the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation of Little Rock, Arkansas. With an endowment of \$2.5 million, the foundation has a staff of eight, engages two interns each year, and is guided by an 11-member board of directors. In 1984-85, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation produced major reports on tax reform, economic development, and groundwater in Arkansas. These reports were distributed without charge to about 3,000 recipients. The foundation is considering taking on new functions in the future, including public television documentaries and a citizen's handbook on hazardous substances.

**Z. SMITH REYNOLDS FOUNDATION:** The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation is, of course, not the only foundation to engage in research. What sets it apart is that its own staff takes an active part in the research. In similar fashion, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation of Winston-Salem,

North Carolina has taken a more direct role in public policy research. In addition to funding policy research efforts like the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research and commissioning reports, such as the N.C. Center's 1985 book, *Grantseeking in North Carolina: A Guide to Foundation and Corporate Giving Programs*, the foundation in 1984 embarked upon a major examination of the "critical issues affecting the quality of postsecondary education." Research on the project—called "The Third Century Project"—will include conferences, surveys of boards of trustees of the state's postsecondary educational institutions, developing demographic profiles, conducting case studies, and examining college facilities and financial aid. Finally, the study will examine the role of government in postsecondary education. Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation Executive Director Thomas W. Lambeth says the Third Century Project has a staff of three and has spent about \$150,000 in its research "over parts of the last three years."

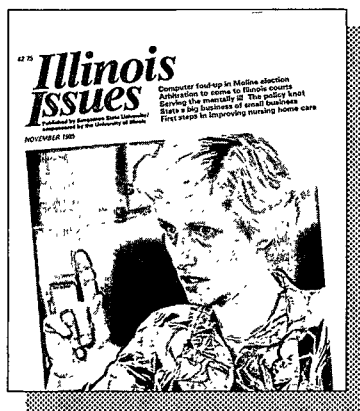
These foundations engaging in policy research have one luxury that other policy outfits eye enviously: a handsome endowment that finances special research and ensures that the light bills will be paid and that staff members will receive their paychecks on time. Most policy organizations, no doubt, would much prefer to have endowments, but very few do. Only Brookings and Hoover, among the national-level think tanks, have substantial endowments; the remainder must hold annual fundraising campaigns.

Few foundations engage regularly in state-level policy research, but many have been instrumental in the state-level public policy movement. For instance, the Ford, Rockefeller Brothers, and Carnegie foundations provided seed money for such groups as *Illinois Issues*, the California Center, the Center for Analysis of Public Issues in New Jersey, and for the N.C. Center. When those early grants ran out, however, the state policy groups turned to other sources, including major foundations within each state, which concentrate on funding projects or organizations within those states. For example, the Illinois group gets major funding from the Joyce Foundation; *New Jersey Reporter* receives major funding from the Fund for New Jersey, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the Florence and John Schumann Foundation; and the N.C. Center receives major grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations.



## The University-Related Policy Institute

**ILLINOIS ISSUES:** Another hybrid organization examining state-level public policy is *Illinois Issues*, a monthly magazine of government and public affairs published by Sangamon State University in Springfield and co-sponsored by the University of Illinois. The magazine, founded in 1975, has a staff of seven plus two part-time faculty members and three to four student interns, and a 20-30 member board of directors (appointed by the two universities) which engages in fundraising and editorial review. It operates with a \$375,000 annual budget. Foundation support represents 15 percent of the budget, while direct support from the two universities makes up about 45 percent of the magazine's income. About 4,500 subscribers contribute 31 percent, and advertising and corporate contributions make up the other 9 percent. Fundraising, reports staff member Marilyn Immel, is a "constant and significant drain on the publisher and the board."



*Illinois Issues* says it "attempts to strike a balance between the reports of the daily media and the scholarly articles of professional journals." It says the measure of its success is the fact that each year, more than 100 *Illinois Issues* articles are reprinted in various books, journals, magazines, and newspapers, including the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Not long ago, the Library of Congress reprinted one of its articles on water policy for use by high school debating teams across the country.

*Illinois Issues* also publishes a roster of state government officials, and a number of other supplementary publications including book-length manuscripts on government policy and process. It

also engages in a series of television programs called "Illinois Issues Profiles," in which magazine Publisher Michael Lennon interviews leading figures from the worlds of Illinois business, education, and government.

THE INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT OF NORTH CAROLINA: *Illinois Issues* is one of a genre of magazines about state and local government published by or in conjunction with state universities. Its content, however, is aimed at a somewhat more general audience than, for instance, the quarterly magazine *Popular Government*, published by the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The publication, now in its 55th year, is aimed at state and

**Table 1. State-Level Public Policy Research Organizations**

Arizona Tax Research Association  
1814 W. Washington Street  
Phoenix, Arizona 85007  
602-253-9121

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation  
308 E. Eighth Street  
Little Rock, Arkansas 72202  
501-376-6854

The California Center  
1714 Capitol Avenue  
Sacramento, California 95814  
916-444-2840

California Taxpayers Association  
921 11th Street, Suite 800  
Sacramento, California 95814  
916-441-0490

Connecticut Public Expenditure Council  
21 Lewis Street  
Hartford, Connecticut 06103  
203-527-8177

Florida Tax Watch, Inc.  
111 N. Gadsden Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32301  
904-222-5052

Tax Foundation of Hawaii  
220 S. King Street  
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813  
808-536-4587

Illinois Issues  
K Building, Sangamon State University  
Springfield, Illinois 62708  
217-786-6084

Taxpayers Federation of Illinois  
525 W. Jefferson Street  
Springfield, Illinois 62702  
217-522-6818

Government Research Service  
701 Jackson, Room 304  
Topeka, Kansas 66603  
913-232-7720

Public Affairs Research Council  
of Louisiana, Inc.  
300 Louisiana Avenue, P.O. Box 3118  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70821  
504-343-9204

Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, Inc.  
24 Province Street, No. 853  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108  
617-720-1000

Citizens Research Council of Michigan  
625 Shelby Street  
Detroit, Michigan 48226  
313-961-5377

Minnesota Taxpayers Association  
480 Cedar Avenue, No. 175  
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101  
612-224-7477

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local officials, and examines in its articles a variety of facets of state and local government. The Institute also examines, for example, the fiscal impact of tax proposals, such as the suggested abolition of the state's property taxes and concomitant increase in state sales taxes. But the Institute does not usually attempt to evaluate how well a program or policy has functioned, nor does it make specific recommendations for changes in state policies.

These types of policy organizations often produce some of the best descriptions of the *process* of government to be found in public policy publishing today. But one potential problem is that because they are financed by the state,

through the university systems, there are some policy matters they cannot easily address—for instance, ranking the effectiveness of legislators, who appropriate university funds. Or, for another example, assessing the performance of the state university system. Their strength is that they can take advantage of the research capabilities that already exist within a university system.

## The Corporate-Financed Nonprofit Research Movement

**I**n many other states, policy research organizations financed largely by major industries engage in fiscal research on state taxation policy

**Table 1. State-Level Public Policy Research Organizations, *continued***

Taxpayers Research Institute of Missouri  
P.O. Box 56  
Jefferson City, Missouri 65102  
314-634-8746

Center for Analysis of Public Issues  
16 Vanderventer Avenue  
Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
609-924-9750

State Report Network  
545 Eighth Avenue  
New York, New York 10018  
212-239-9797

Institute of Government  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Knapp Building 059A  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514  
919-966-4107

North Carolina Center for  
Public Policy Research  
P.O. Box 430  
Raleigh, North Carolina 27602  
919-832-2839

Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation  
101 Reynolda Village  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27106  
919-725-7541

Pennsylvania Economy League, Inc.  
P.O. Box 105  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17108  
717-234-3151

Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council  
222 Richmond Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903  
401-521-6320

Texas Research League  
P.O. Box 12456  
Austin, Texas 78711  
512-472-3127

Washington Research Council  
906 S. Columbia Street, No. 350  
Olympia, Washington 98501  
206-357-6643

West Virginia Research League, Inc.  
1107 Charleston National Plaza  
Charleston, West Virginia 25301  
304-346-9451

Public Expenditure Survey of Wisconsin  
P.O. Box 1316  
Madison, Wisconsin 53701  
608-255-6767

Wisconsin Reports, Inc.  
115 W. Main Street  
Madison, Wisconsin 53703  
608-251-1221

Wyoming Taxpayers Association  
2515 Warren Avenue, No. 300  
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82001  
307-635-8761



and assess whether taxpayers get their money's worth from state programs. These organizations—members of an umbrella group called the Governmental Research Association—are non-profit corporations with small staffs, modest budgets, and targeted audiences of government, business, and media leaders. Among them are these groups:

**THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH COUNCIL OF LOUISIANA:** Established in 1950, the Public Affairs Research Council has a staff of 12 and an annual budget of about \$650,000. Most of that—94 percent—comes from its membership of 3,400, and the remainder comes from research contracts the Council signs with local governments. The council also has one of the largest boards of directors in the business—250 persons—but an executive committee of 23 persons sets Council policy.

According to Carol Miller, vice president for development of the council, the organization annually publishes seven issues of "PAR Analysis," a multicolor newsletter summarizing the council's current findings. It also publishes weekly legislative bulletins when the legislature is in session, and holds an annual conference on economic development in Louisiana. Recent research topics of the Public Affairs Research Council include workers compensation, education, state budget procedures, campaign finance, ethics for state and local employees, and constitutional revision.

**THE ARIZONA TAX RESEARCH ASSOCIATION:** Established in 1940, this group has a four-person staff, a 50-person board of directors, and a \$200,000 annual budget—95 percent of it from corporate givers. The group publishes a newsletter 10 times a year, which is mailed to 1,500 recipients, publishes a tax digest, and holds periodic seminars on such subjects as the unitary tax and education management.

**THE TAXPAYERS' FEDERATION OF ILLINOIS:** Also founded in 1940, it has a staff of six, a 30-person board, and an annual budget of \$350,000, with corporations donating 85 percent of the budget. Ten times a year, the Federation publishes "Tax Facts," a newsletter with a circulation of 2,500 aimed at members, the press, and the General Assembly and its staff. The Federation also publishes a *Legislative Manual* and *Fiscal Facts, A Practical Guide to Illinois Real Estate Taxation*, a reference guide to county



government law, a biennial analysis of the Illinois tax climate, and periodic studies of special tax and spending issues. The group says that although its primary audience and membership is the Illinois business community, "individual members receive equal treatment in their respective areas of concern."

**THE CITIZENS RESEARCH COUNCIL OF MICHIGAN:** Organized in 1916, this outfit has

a staff of 10 plus one intern, a 25-person board of directors, and a \$505,000 annual budget. About three-fourths of its budget comes from corporations, and the remainder from foundations, interest income, sales, and individual contributions. The Council publishes its research reports in the form of a four-to-eight-page pamphlet called "Council Comments," which often includes tables and charts showing comparative data. Recent Council reports have addressed Michigan's state cash deficit, improving the administration of special ad valorem tax assessments, and reforming the financing of adult educational programs.

Here's how the Council described one policy issue in which its work had an impact: "Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, the state of Michigan outspent its general purpose resources by more than \$800 million, covering the deficit by changing accounting definitions and rolling over the debt from year to year by continual short-term borrowing. A series of Citizens Research Council reports beginning in 1980 defined the true nature of the state's financial problem, its growing seriousness, and the options for remedy. The reports received a great deal of press attention, including a lead *Wall Street Journal* editorial; research staff made presentations on the issue before many groups large and small; the issue of 'voodoo accounting' surfaced in the 1982 gubernatorial campaign; and the state began to solve the problem through earmarked tax revenues in 1982. Today the state's cash position is sound and the earmarked taxes are due to expire before the end of calendar 1985."

**THE TAXPAYERS RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF MISSOURI:** Organized in 1939, the Institute has a staff of seven and a 61-member board of directors that sets policy and is active in fundraising. Its annual budget of about \$267,000 comes primarily from memberships of business and professional citizens. It circulates research reports to

1,500 to 2,000 government officials, legislators, news media, institute members, and the public. Recent research reports examined the creation of a state cash reserve and proposals to roll back property tax rates. Other reports have concerned public employee pensions, which led to creation of legislative oversight, and executive branch restructuring.

**TEXAS RESEARCH LEAGUE:** Organized in 1953, the League has a paid staff of 17.5 persons and employs two to four interns each year. Its 200-member board of directors functions primarily as a fundraising arm of the League—a successful one. The League's annual budget is \$962,000, with

more than 96 percent of that stemming from corporate support.

The League publishes a monthly newsletter, "TRL ANALYSIS," which has a circulation of 4,500, and various state public finance bulletins, usually during legislative sessions. Recent reports include research on school district budgets in the state, funding of public education, program accountability in state government, and an examination of county government mechanisms. The League also holds periodic statewide conferences. In 1982, one such conference examined Social Security provisions; a 1986 conference is planned on state taxation. The League's reports

**Table 2. Comparison of Selected State-Level Public Policy Research Organizations**

Organization	Annual Budget	Staff/ Interns	Magazine	Newsletter	Research Reports	Gov. Directory	TV Program	Seminars
The California Center	\$900,000	13/4	12/yr	12/yr	No	Leg., Exec., Judic.	Yes	1/yr
Center for Analysis of Public Issues - N.J.	\$225,000	6	10/yr	No	No	Leg., Exec.	Yes	2/yr
North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research	\$385,000	8/4	4/yr	6-8/yr	3-4/yr	Leg.	No	1/yr
Illinois Issues	\$375,000	7/4	12/yr	No	No	Leg., Exec., Judic.	Yes	No
State Report Network N.Y., N.J., Cal.	N/A	N/A	12/yr	No	No	No	No	No
Government Research Service Kansas	N/A	2	No	24/yr	No	Leg., Exec., Judic.	No	6/yr
The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation - Arkansas	\$2.5 million (Endowment)	8/2	No	No	4/yr	No	No	No
Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, Inc.	\$650,000	12	No	7/yr	Yes	Leg.	No	1/yr
Arizona Tax Research Association	\$200,000	4	No	10/yr	Yes	No	No	Yes
Taxpayers Federation of Illinois	\$275,000	6	No	10/yr	Yes	No	No	Yes
Citizens Research Council of Michigan	\$505,000	10	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Taxpayers Research Institute of Missouri	\$267,000	7	No	No	Yes	Leg.	No	No
Texas Research League	\$962,000	17.5	No	10/yr	Yes	No	No	Yes
West Virginia Research League	\$170,000	4	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Wyoming Taxpayers Association	\$166,000	3	No	6/yr	Yes	No	No	4/yr

N/A: Not Available

Source: Survey by North Carolina Insight, September 1985.

have led to increased efforts to control expenditures for school district budgets, and another report led to legislation raising college tuition.

**WASHINGTON RESEARCH COUNCIL:** Organized in 1932, this organization employs a staff of seven, directed by a board of directors of 39 persons. The Council declined to release information on its annual budget, but said it produced two reports last year—on industrial insurance and taxes on manufacturers. The Council also publishes newsletters and policy briefs.

**WEST VIRGINIA RESEARCH LEAGUE:** Incorporated in 1969, the League has an annual budget of \$170,000 and a staff of four persons. Its support comes from West Virginia businesses and foundations. The League publishes an annual handbook on state and local taxation, and responds to government and legislative requests for research reports, which usually are made public by the requesting agency.

**WYOMING TAXPAYERS ASSOCIATION:** Begun in 1937, this organization has a staff of three and a board of directors of 30. Its annual budget is \$170,000, all of which comes from its members, who are described as individuals, "corporate tax representatives," and association executives. It produces a bi-monthly newsletter, a tax calendar, an annual Legislative Summary Service covering daily legislative action, and participates in Tax Freedom Day. Last year, the Association produced a major study on severance taxes, as well as reports on property taxation and a summary of the taxes levied by state and local governments. The group also holds workshops on taxation every three months.

Other members of the Governmental Research Association include organizations in California, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. The strength of many of these organizations is that they have been at work in the public policy vineyards long enough that their financial stability is no longer in question, thanks in part to major corporate support. To others, however, strong corporate support might result in what consultants like to call "the art of directed conclusions"—that policy centers will produce only what their major supporters are willing to buy.

But even the oldest and strongest of the policy centers has to work continuously to have its message heard. As the Citizens Research Council of Michigan puts it, "[T]he greatest failure ... is in articulating the unique contribution we can make to public affairs in terms that are compelling enough

to generate contributions sufficient to the task at hand."

## Strengths and Weaknesses of Public Policy Organizations

Virtually all these centers and organizations have succeeded in making their research products available to the public. Research from state-level policy centers is valuable for several reasons, says N.C. Center Executive Director Ran Coble. The established media "don't have the time to do research," explains Coble. In addition, government agencies often cut funds for research and evaluation in times of austerity because these do not represent direct services for constituents. The N.C. Center provides "a truly independent voice for concerns of citizens not tied to a political party or economic interest," says Coble.

As discussed in the sections above, many research groups monitor how much their work actually influences public policy decisions. But putting an effectiveness yardstick on such research can prove difficult. "Our work in the area of water policy increased public awareness about the issue, but the public pressure was not enough to counteract the farming interests in a legislative battle," explains Wendy Margolis, a policy officer at the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. The Foundation's work is valuable because "special interests run the government and control too much of the legislative process," says Margolis. The Foundation seeks to "provide in-depth research and information from other than a lobbying perspective."

Not all policy organizations, however, consider direct government action to be the proof of effectiveness. For some, merely disseminating information is a success. *New Jersey Reporter* prides itself on providing comprehensive analysis and placing issues and events in historical perspective, says Editor Rick Sinding. But the magazine considers its greatest failure the relative lack of visibility—"a function, one supposes, of lack of money," laments Sinding.

That lack of visibility is not uncommon to public policy research organizations—or to the better-known national think-tanks, either. Most public policy groups endure painfully small press runs for books, reports, and other publications. While commercial publishers judge success in terms of profit, "public policy presses are not usually troubled when a book loses money," pointed out Suzanne Gordon in *The Washington Post* last year. "If the book has influenced government decision-making at a local, state, or national

level, it is deemed a success. The major audience for these books, therefore, is ... the academic experts, businessmen, lobbyists, consultants, and, most importantly, politicians who set the nation's course."<sup>2</sup>

Considering their audience, policy research centers need to keep on the cutting edge of issues. But sometimes, they become stilted or fall behind when they fail to anticipate emerging issues—or fail to try something new, as one old hand in the public policy business explains. Policy organizations should “try to identify the emerging issues,” says Samuel Gove, the outgoing long-time chairman of *Illinois Issues* magazine. “Don’t get locked into doing the same thing time after time. Examine the changes that are to come. For instance, the banking world is undergoing a revolt, and national banking is coming. The insurance business is in turmoil. Even if we were to elect a Democratic president, we would continue to have decentralization and deregulation. We should be looking at these things.”

No matter how close to the edge these groups stay, however, they face other difficulties. Obtaining funding for a controversial organization can be time-consuming and difficult. Frequent staff turnover or staff burnout is a problem. Such groups can allow publishing to become a motive for existence. And perhaps most frustrating is measuring the degree of effectiveness.

Her group has “a lack of clout in policy formation,” notes Margolis of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. And while foundations have the luxury of endowments, they also must live with certain limitations. “Legal restraints on foundations may hamper the organization’s effectiveness,” says Margolis.

The Citizens Research Council of Michigan believes that policy organizations should not focus on building an enviable win-loss record. Instead, they should seek to provide the best research they can. “We do not lobby and do not believe that our success can be measured in terms of short-term ‘wins and losses’ in the policymaking arena,” says the Council. “We operate on the premise that if our studies are factual and their conclusions compelling, they will sell themselves in the marketplace of ideas.”

The Council notes that public policy researchers must have “a geologist’s sense of time” because the process of improving government is a time-consuming one. Over the long run, the Council attempts to assist government in administering its programs in the public interest, but it does so by providing a sort of “outside

insight” that helps the press, the general public, and government decision-makers themselves.

The Texas Research League echoes Coble’s recognition that independent, nonpartisan research is still highly valued in a world where information is more available than ever before. “While both state and local governments have developed more capable and sophisticated research programs over the past decade, there still remains a continued need for nonpartisan, credible research on an in-depth basis to examine public policy and current issues,” the League says.

“Perhaps the most lasting contribution of the new think tanks is that they have transformed the terms of public policy debate,” writes Easterbrook in *The Atlantic*.<sup>3</sup> State-level think tanks have also shaped debate for local and state governments. They have identified the pressing public issues and they have framed the debate in terms of what public policy should be, with solid research backed up by ideas. “Ideas,” Easterbrook reminds us, “move nations.” They move states, too.

However, there is always the bottom line that threatens the security of some policy organizations: finances. Almost every group has gone through hard times, when membership was low, when grant support was late in arriving, when public interest in government institutions waned, or when corporate support slowed to a trickle. That causes many organizations to spend a large amount of time on fundraising, promotions, and marketing programs instead of engaging in and directing the research and writing that are the groups’ prime products and reason for existence.

Obviously, much work needs to be done in the arena of state policy research. Various organizational vehicles continue to find ways of filling the opportunities that exist. “Like all publishing,” concludes Suzanne Gordon, “public policy publishing will have its fads (industrial policy, for example, is out this year; nuclear policy may be peaking, and education may be on the rise), but most observers believe that the phenomenon will be with us for a long time to come.”<sup>4</sup> ■

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Ideas Move Nations,” by Gregg Easterbrook, *The Atlantic*, January 1986, pp. 66-80.

<sup>2</sup>“Public Policy Publishing: Lobbying in Print,” by Suzanne Gordon, *The Washington Post Book World*, July 28, 1985, pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup>Easterbrook, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon, p. 6. Also see “The Role of Public Policy Research Institutes in the National Scene” by Thomas F. Johnson, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C.