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Why Conservatives Should Help Save the Cato Institute

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By Michael Cannon

Charles and David Koch's lawsuit to takeover the Cato Institute would destroy Cato's credibility, by putting put Cato under the complete control of a single financial interest. It thus amounts to both fratricide and suicide. I can make sense of the Left's response: when your enemy is committing suicide, don't interfere—but if a blast of Koch Derangement Syndrome will steel their resolve, all the better!

What I cannot fathom is why a conservative like RedState.com's Erick Erickson would condone such fratricide, much less [attack Cato](#). Most of Erickson's criticisms of Cato, in particular his claims that our board of directors has "no legal argument" and plans to "ignore" a legally binding contract, have been disproven by others [here](#) and [here](#). I will focus on his claims that Cato has "failed to stay relevant" and "I rarely ever hear Cato mentioned these days and sure can't think of anything it has, as an institute, been a leader on[.]"

Where to begin? I suppose I should start by thanking Erickson for recognizing a small portion of Cato's impact. He praises Cato for its gubernatorial score card. And its leadership on Social Security reform—in 2005. Also, "some of [Cato's] individual analysts are quite sharp and still individually impactful."

But the important point is that, *by design*, activists who focus on winning elections and key votes will probably miss most of what Cato does.

Unlike many other policy shops, Cato “does not measure its impact by the number of laws enacted. The aim of the Institute is to change the broader public debate rather than to directly influence policymakers.” We don’t pass legislation. We change how people think, so they pass *better* legislation.

Take Social Security. Erickson credits Cato for its work on Social Security reform in 2005, when President Bush proposed personal accounts. The main reason personal accounts were even on the agenda then is that the Cato Institute has been promoting the idea since at least 1980. Cato did the long-term work of taking that nascent concept, vetting it, improving it, and making it a viable political issue.

Cato has done the same with health savings accounts, which it brought to a nationwide audience in 1992 and which became law in 2003. Free-market activists may have no clue how the proposals they are pushing came to be. We do.

The evidence of Cato’s impact is everywhere, once you know where to look.

- Erickson began inveighing against an “individual mandate” in 2009. It no doubt helped that Cato had begun laying the intellectual case against the mandate a quarter-century earlier.

- Erickson is trying to prevent Mitt Romney from winning the GOP presidential nomination. The reason that’s still an issue is that the other candidates’ Super PACs prevented Romney from sewing up the nomination early. And the only reason Super PACs exist is because Cato president Ed Crane and his co-plaintiffs brought the SpeechNow.org case, which created them. Every breath Erickson draws to attack Romney is testament to Cato’s impact.

- Erickson praises the Supreme Court’s Heller decision, which recognized the Second Amendment protects an individual right to keep

and bear arms, and has criticized the National Rifle Association for not supporting the case. The only reason Heller exists is because Cato chairman Bob Levy conceived of the case, selected the plaintiffs, litigated the case as co-counsel, and resisted the NRA's requests that he not pursue it.

- Evidence of Cato's impact is even present in Erickson's 2010 book, where he cites Cato scholars more than a dozen times and explicitly thanks Cato for providing "invaluable research and data."

These are just a few examples of how conservatives benefit from Cato.

What happens when *we don't* do the long-term work necessary to prepare the public for free-market reforms? That was the case in the decades before HillaryCare. Desperate to stop that law and focused only on the short game, Republicans picked up and ran with the only idea lying around—the Heritage Foundation's individual mandate—without noticing it was equally nightmarish. That locked many short-term thinkers into supporting a mandate and crowded out alternative reforms until it was too late.

None of which is to suggest that Cato could not improve. But when George F. Will says Cato "is the foremost upholder of the idea of liberty in the nation that is the foremost upholder of the idea of liberty," we must be doing something right. And when Ezra Klein admits that Cato's credibility and arguments are changing his mind on big government, you get an idea of what will be lost if Cato loses that credibility.

I have met Erickson. He seems like a nice guy. I hope he'll accept my invitation to have lunch at Cato someday, so we can talk about Cato's work.

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