

Conservatism vs. Libertarianism: Heritage, Cato Square Off in Debate

Melanie Wilcox

July 24, 2012 at 4:26 pm

Which is the preferable philosophy, conservatism or libertarianism? Last Wednesday, interns from The Cato Institute (Matthew Cavedon and Jack Solowey) and The Heritage Foundation (Maura Cremin and Keith Neely) participated in the annual intern debate held in Cato's F.A. Hayek Auditorium to sharpen their understanding of the differences between traditional conservatism and libertarianism. It got deep.

“Can [conservatism and libertarianism] be called ideologies?” asked Tim Carney, debate moderator and senior political correspondent at The Washington Examiner. “Is there a deep philosophical root connecting them? Where do we form a divide?”

Both hold freedom as paramount, agreeing broadly on the importance of free markets, limited government and private property. But the debaters articulated their oft-interchangeable tenets via policy topics from current news cycles: drug legalization, defense budget, immigration and government's role in promoting virtues. This preceded a question-and-answer session from the 295 attendees in the audience and seen by the 1,436 online viewers. These hot-button issues spice up the never-ending dialogue that could otherwise sound like an echo-chamber to those who aren't students of government.

Each side still holds dear individual liberty over the modern liberal sentiment of equality, or wealth distribution, but semantics become valid when the definition of liberty comes into question. Mainly, conservatives take into account the human condition to seek social structures in order to maximize freedom, whereas libertarians solely focus on autonomous individual decision-making. Both sides advocate for philosopher Isaiah Berlin's notion of negative liberty: an individual may act as they please so long as their actions do not harm others. While debaters from both sides argued that their philosophy best matches Berlin's notion of liberty, each had differing explanations as to why this may be true. Heritage interns appealed to the principles of the Founding, principles that promote freedom, prosperity, opportunity and civil society. Cato interns appealed to its motto of "individual liberty, free markets, and peace."

Carney was the one to raise the inevitable drug legalization topic first. Neely, a rising senior of Vanderbilt University, began, "Let's take a journey away from our generation's understanding of drug use—the 17-year-old smoking pot in his parents' basement—and head over to the poorest neighborhood in Washington, D.C., where drug use is rampant. Where drugs ... have destroyed lives, broken families, and ruined communities. ... Is a man who is addicted to drugs truly free?"

"Let's take a walk on another journey," Cato's Cavedon bantered. "One in 28 children has a parent in jail because of drugs, there are several non-violent offenders in jail due to drugs, and more people die in the war on drugs than on overdosing."

Namely, the bigger question at play is whether or not the government has a role in promoting morality. Conservatives believe that while the government is not in the business of saving souls or inculcating virtue, it must sustain the basic moral framework without which society will collapse.

Cremin, a recent graduate of the University of Oklahoma, cited John Adams, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people." Heritage expert Matthew Spalding makes the case that the Founders established a

decentralized framework in which churches and other traditional institutions would help shape the lives and characters of free citizens.

Cato agreed tepidly that people should be free to worship how they wish and that those institutions are valuable, but that government should have no role whatsoever in promoting it, pointing to the perils of Western Europe having a nationalized religion.

They also differed on the view of the defense budget. “What we have is not a defense budget, but a military budget,” Solowey said. “The deficit is the greatest national security risk.” Furthermore, Cavedon noted, “There are Americans in countries that haven’t seen war.”

Heritage agreed that the deficit is a national security threat, but emphasized the growing challenges the United States faces from other countries, including Iran, North Korea, cybersecurity threats and biological warfare. They then refuted Cato’s claims that the Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey was a waste of money since it travels twice the speed of a normal helicopter.

Another trigger issue arises out of the national security conversation: Should individuals be able to freely move across the U.S. border? Heritage referenced the 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States that do not pay taxes and use domestic services. They listed a few of Heritage’s solutions including maintaining and increasing efforts to enhance border security, rejecting amnesty proposals, strengthening interior enforcement measures in the United States, reforming the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services to handle immigration more effectively and efficiently, and enhancing legal-worker programs to provide legal avenues of immigration that meet the needs of employers and immigrants.

Overall, the common ground found in the debate was inevitable and obvious. To this conservative, it seemed perhaps because the libertarians adopted extreme right-wing ideologies while using a tactic of painting the Heritage interns as big government neo-cons. Of course, decades of debate pose a challenge to be

condensed into two-minute statements and one-minute rebuttals from each side – but what’s a debate without parameters!

“Libertarianism is a caricature of what I love about America,” Neely said. “Conservatism reconciles with reality.” Cremin seemed to agree, and cited William F. Buckley, “Conservatism if the politics of reality.” Furthermore, she said that “libertarianism works in a utopian world,” and thus called for a pragmatic approach that supports Americans’ freedom by promoting a “strong national defense, infrastructure, and border security.”

Heritage would like to thank The Cato Institute for hosting the debate and for Heritage interns for preparing and representing The Heritage Foundation exceptionally well.

Melanie Wilcox is currently a member of the [Young Leaders Program](#) at The Heritage Foundation.