

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Integrity of Policy Analysis

Paul R. Pillar | March 8, 2012

I have been following with a combination of puzzled fascination and profound concern the attempt by the brothers Charles and David Koch to seize control of the Cato Institute. Readers of the *National Interest* website know that Cato scholars are major contributors to these spaces, and that is one sense in which we readers have a stake in how this power play comes out. I do not pretend to understand Cato's unusual governing structure, which the Koch brothers are trying to manipulate and which includes a small number of nominally-valued “shares” alongside the normal sort of board of directors. But this is not just a non-profit version of inside baseball. A larger stake that the rest of us have in this involves nothing less than the integrity of policy debate and policy analysis in this country.

The Koch brothers evidently are attempting to latch Cato to a partisan (in this case, Republican) cause. That is fundamentally different from policy analysis being identified with a particular school of thought or even ideology. It is fair to say of a Cato product, “That’s a libertarian viewpoint, of course.” But with or without that ideological label, the discussion is all about substance. Whether at the level of general ideology or specific policy issues, it is still about substance. And there is no reason to doubt that the arguments are genuine or to suspect that they are merely a cover for something else.

Once the purpose of argumentation becomes the advancement of a particular political party or candidate, that is no longer the case. What are ostensibly arguments about policy are only tools for accomplishing something else. Sometimes the policies being advocated correspond with the genuine positions of a political leader or candidate, but not necessarily. All of this makes policy debate less useful as a means either of public education or of arriving at sound policies. We see numerous examples of this unfortunate pattern in the current race for the Republican presidential nomination. The candidates' back-and-forth on Romneycare, for example, has been pretty useless as a way of

understanding what works and what doesn't work in health care at either the state or the federal level. The arguments are just means for Romney's opponents to bash him for inconsistency or for his supporters to defend his record.

I have high regard for the quality of Cato's work, which has filled an important role of clear and disciplined analysis from a libertarian perspective. (Disclosure: I have collaborated in the past with Cato scholars.) Losing that would be something that Republicans as well as Democrats, non-libertarians as well as libertarians (and even anti-libertarians) ought to regret. It would be one more thing in Washington that would be surrendered to tribal partisanship.