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Gene Healy: Santorum is severely wrong

By **GENE HEALY** / A vice president, Cato Institute

"I am severely conservative," Mitt Romney told the crowd at the Conservative Political Action Conference Saturday. Way to sell it, governor!

Clearly the Romney-2012 Presidential Unit still has a few bugs in its pandering software. The former Massachusetts governor's robotic awkwardness helped propel Rick Santorum to a string of victories in Missouri, Minnesota, and Colorado last week, and a new Pew Research Center poll has him with a slight lead on Romney among Republican voters nationally.

To borrow from Mitt's rhetorical stylings, I'm not severely conservative, but I do have a case of Stage IV libertarianism. And anyone who shares that condition will find Santorum's rise particularly vexing. The former senator from Pennsylvania is libertarianism's sweater-vested arch-nemesis.

In a Pennsylvania Press Club luncheon in Harrisburg last summer, Santorum declared, "I am not a libertarian, and I fight very strongly against libertarian influence within the Republican Party and the conservative movement."

In that regard, Santorum has a pretty impressive record. By voting for the No Child Left Behind Act, he helped give President Obama the power to micromanage the nation's schools from Washington; and by supporting a prescription drug entitlement for Medicare, he helped saddle the taxpayers with a \$16 trillion unfunded liability.

Santorum voted for the 2005 "bridge to nowhere" highway bill, has backed an expanded national service program, and his compassionate conservatism has the Bono seal of approval: "On our issues, he has been a defender of the most vulnerable." Rick Santorum: He's from the government, and he's here to help.

Santorum's 2012 campaign platform even includes a pledge to "re-direct funds within HHS, so it can create public/private partnerships... for the purpose of strengthening marriages, families, and fatherhood."

If you liked what the feds did to the housing market, wait till you see what they can do for your marriage.

The Tea Party movement was supposed to represent an end to this sort of moralistic Big Government conservatism. Animated by "fiscal responsibility,

limited government, and free markets," as the Tea Party Patriots' credo put it, the movement had supposedly put social issues on the back burner to focus on the crisis of government growth.

At one time, Santorum seemed to share this view of the Tea Party — and it troubled him. In that same talk in Harrisburg, he said, "I've got some real concerns about this movement within the Republican Party and the Tea Party movement to sort of refashion conservatism and I will vocally and publicly oppose it."

Santorum needn't have worried: In this year's contests, he's regularly drawn more support from Tea Party voters than Ron Paul, who has been described as the "intellectual godfather of the Tea Party movement."

Exit polls show Santorum beating Paul among self-described Tea Party supporters in Iowa, South Carolina and Florida, trailing him only in independent-heavy New Hampshire and Nevada.

A recent *Time* magazine symposium asked leading thinkers on the Right, "What Is Conservatism?" Anti-tax advocate Grover Norquist offered this answer: "Conservatives ask only one thing of the government. They wish to be left alone."

Tell that to Santorum, whose agenda rests on meddling with other people, sometimes with laws, sometimes with aircraft carrier groups.

"This idea that people should be left alone, be able to do whatever they want to do," Santorum complained to NPR in 2006, "that we shouldn't get involved in the bedroom, we shouldn't get involved in cultural issues... that is not how traditional conservatives view the world."

That version of conservatism has a new standard bearer, and he's rising in the polls.

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