



Sesame Street will Survive Without Government Subsidies, says CATO legal scholar

By [Kelsey Osterman](#) /// October 18, 2012

Big Bird has been put on notice.

GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney's promise during the first presidential debate that he would cut government funding of stations like the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) has caught the attention of conservatives.

During a presentation at the [CATO Institute](#) on Wednesday, legal scholar Trevor Burrus said [PBS](#) should be defunded because it is successful and does not need federal money to survive.

“If we can't even defund something that will continue to exist after we defund it, then we're just going to ride the slow fiscal train off the cliff eventually,” Burrus said.

He asserted that because the [Sesame Street](#) host gets such a small portion of their funding from the federal government — around 15 percent, he said — it can easily survive without government subsidies. If the move is made to defund public broadcasting on radio and TV, then other organizations receiving larger amounts of government funding could follow suit, thereby saving the government millions of dollars. “If you can't defund this, then you can't defund anything,” Burrus said. “This is a test case.”

Republicans in Congress [attempted to pass such cuts](#) to PBS and similar services such as National Public Radio (NPR) earlier this year, but failed. Now, thanks to Mitt Romney, the issue has popped back up on conservatives' radar.

Burrus said public broadcasting is politically controlled, even though it gets so little money from the government. “What is obviously true is that the money clearly influences their behavior,” he said. “If it didn't then they wouldn't be fighting for it. They know — and I've talked to many people at PBS — they know that they can survive without federal money.”

During his talk, Burrus noted public radio and TV broadcasting was started in order to push government messages and “clarify the social dilemma.”

“Is there any possible way you could clarify the social dilemma in a non-partisan, non-political way?” Burrus asked. “Absolutely not.” And although some rural TV stations will cease to exist if they lose their federal funding, Burrus said the benefits of TV and radio programs free from government control would outweigh the costs. “If you love it, you should set it free,” he concluded. “We should not keep it tied to government funding.”

[GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s comment in the first presidential debate](#) about stopping government subsidies to public broadcasting brought harsh criticism and [sparked “Save Big Bird” social media campaigns](#) on Twitter and Facebook.

And although the Sesame Street workshop, at some level probably enjoys the publicity, [they have requested](#) that the Obama campaign remove their [anti-Romney ad](#) featuring the big yellow fowl. But an Obama adviser last week said [there are no plans](#) to acquiesce to the workshop’s request.

At Tuesday night’s town hall presidential debate, [President Obama again brought up PBS funding](#). “We haven’t heard from the governor any specifics beyond Big Bird and eliminating funding for Planned Parenthood in terms of how he pays for [tax cuts and additional military spending],” Obama said.