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Michael Cannon's Brave Bet

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I'm impressed: Cato's Michael Cannon **bet Karen Davenport**, and let her adjudicate the outcome:

I bet Davenport \$20 that I could convince her that the following two claims are true:



Two Claims

1. Supporting an individual mandate is an act of personal irresponsibility.
2. Supporting universal coverage means that you are willing to let people die unnecessarily.

We agreed on three rules. First, there would be no splitting the difference or agreeing to disagree -- I would either succeed or I would fail. Second, Davenport would be the ultimate arbiter of whether I succeeded or failed. Third, if I failed, Davenport would have to explain why she was not convinced.

The outcome:

After my presentation and a subsequent exchange (mostly about the second claim), Davenport was unconvinced and she took the \$40. She made two arguments for why I failed:

1. A crucial part of my argument -- the claim by Helen Levy and David Meltzer that there is **"no evidence"** that expanding health insurance is a cost-effective way of improving health -- is not necessarily true and is, in fact, controversial among health economists, and
2. The lives that would be lost by adopting universal coverage (rather than a more cost-effective strategy for improving health), would be less than the lives lost during the time it would take to conduct experiments to determine which strategy is most cost-effective.

You can watch Cannon's case [here](#).

P.S. Last year Robin refused me **analogous terms**.

CATEGORIES: Economic Philosophy

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COMMENTS (3 to date)

Latest Comment

Blackadder writes:

I'm probably more sympathetic to Cannon's politics than most people, but if he had bet me on those terms he still would have lost. Canon's argument for his second claim is that we don't know universal coverage will save more lives than any other alternative, so if we still do it we are willing to let people die unnecessarily. As I see it there are two problems with this argument.

1. The argument applies not only to supporting universal coverage, but to supporting any alternative to universal coverage, since for all we know universal coverage might be the best way to save lives. So if Cannon is right any course of action we take will show a willingness to let people die unnecessarily. This includes Cannon's preferred course of action (experimenting with various possibilities) and it includes doing nothing. Yet saying that someone is willing to let people die unnecessarily implies that they could have not been willing to do this. So the argument is wrong.

2. Cannon's argument ignores the political dimension of policy-making. Maybe policy X would save more lives than universal coverage, but enacting policy X is politically impossible, whereas universal coverage is not. The political constraints involved in our system of government are, I think, substantial.

Posted March 23, 2010 10:42 PM

Koz writes:

Interesting arrangement, almost more interesting than the actual subject matter.

I wish there could be some clarification of the other party (Ms. Davenport in this case) and her obligation to listen to and internalize Mr. Cannon's arguments.

Posted March 23, 2010 11:13 PM

Lord writes:

Cost effectiveness is not the only measure. Limiting freedoms could be much more cost effective, but there are limits to what we are, at least currently, willing to do in that regard.

Posted March 26, 2010 5:27 PM

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