

## *Frum Forum*

# DC Interns Shine at Cato Debate

July 22nd, 2011 at 9:54 am  [Ajay Ravichandran](#) | [3 Comments](#) |

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The Cato Institute held its second annual Libertarianism vs. Conservatism Intern Debate Thursday, pitting Cato interns against students interning at the Heritage Foundation. This year's event proved to be a marked improvement over last year, with the two sides covering a wider range of issues and displaying more original thinking. While the conservative side came out on top overall, both groups failed to address the key economic issues facing young people.

In both this year's debate and last years, the two sides generally agreed with each other about the size of government and about economic issues, so the focus was on national security as well as social issues like gay marriage and drug policy. Libertarians would typically accuse conservatives of inconsistency in opposing big government while favoring intervention in citizens' private lives –in this year's debate, Cato intern Irina Schneider, a recent American University graduate, argued that “any man who cuts liberty into pieces ... does not believe in liberty.” Conservatives, in turn, attacked libertarians for being impractical and neglecting moral concerns which they associate with cherished American traditions –at last year's debate, Heritage intern Shannon Hale, of Ave Maria University, claimed that “Libertarianism would be great if it worked, but in fact it doesn't work.” These tendencies were carried to extremes at last year's debate, which featured young conservatives trying to show that the Founders were modern American conservatives and young libertarians delivering long harangues devoted exclusively to drug policy.

The conservatives won this year's debate, though, by responding to the libertarians' charges of inconsistency with a defense of prudence as a conservative virtue. . . “Consistency and simplistic arguments cannot provide the basis for an entire philosophy. This is a complex world and as such, requires prudence,” argued Heritage intern Erin Grant, a junior at Harding University, in response to a question on drugs. In a discussion of foreign policy, her co-debater Justin DeGenero, a senior at Cornell, added that “Everything is a false choice[for libertarians] ... [To them,] if you're not in support of isolationism, you're a nation-building neoconservative. But that's really not the choice.” While there were still an unfortunate emphasis on invoking the Founding – both debaters repeatedly insisted that conservatism was mainly about finding new applications for

principles developed in 1776 – the discussions of prudence got the most applause and helped counter the libertarians’ central point.

The libertarians continued to focus mainly on drugs, though they did broaden their focus a bit this time to discuss defense, immigration, and gay marriage more extensively. While their emphasis on rigid consistency often made them come off as dogmatic, they did develop a somewhat novel reply to conservative charges of amorality which stressed the difference between the state and civil society. “Social order springs not from the state, but from institutions like the family [and] the school,” said Schneider, “and we should allow these institutions, rather than the state, to teach people about the destructive effects of narcotics.” Comments like this made them seem less extreme, but they were unable to come up with an effective response to the conservatives’ embrace of pragmatism.

However, it was surprising and regrettable that neither side tried to think creatively about the central question most young people are wondering about: will I have a job after I graduate? Since the recent economic downturn and the ongoing jobs crisis represent the most serious difficulty conservatives and libertarians are likely to have in selling their free-market agenda to young people, so it would have been nice to get input from young members of both movements on these questions. Still, the debate was a step forward from last year, and hopefully future debaters will be able to spare enough time from arguments over drug legalization and the beliefs of long-dead politicians to discuss the issues that the rest of the country cares about.

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