



Would Conservative Cato Institute Mouthpiece Be Best Advocate for Falls Church City Kids?

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The recent, national conservative effort to commandeer local school boards in response to specious culture-issue grievances has arrived in the “Little City” of Falls Church.

Cato Institute Vice President Ilya Shapiro is running for FC school board.

Who is Ilya Shapiro? What does he believe? If elected, would his choices further the community’s goals? In a democracy, voters need to know what candidates stand for.

In a recent letter to the *Falls Church News Press*, Mr. Shapiro seemed to bristle at an attempt to discover his beliefs. His employer—the Cato Institute, formerly the Charles Koch Foundation—pushes numerous views many in Falls Church find repugnant. Shapiro distanced himself from those views while cherry picking a few that aren’t retrograde.

Don’t be fooled. Mr. Shapiro isn’t an accountant at a widget factory. He’s the mouthpiece before the U.S. Supreme Court for an intensely political organization that exists to influence the laws we all live under. Shapiro’s job is to staunchly advocate Cato’s views. Equally important—and revelatory: he chose Cato, and Cato chose him. Yet somehow Cato’s views aren’t his? Seriously?

Asked about specific issues, Shapiro deflected: his field is “constitutional studies.” As if constitutional law were some circumscribed academic discipline, like lepidoptery. Here are merely a few examples of how Cato uses constitutional law: (1) to push school privatization, often seen as cover for perpetuating racial segregation; (2) to attack minority voting rights—see the brief Cato filed with the Supreme Court in *Shelby Co. v. Holder*; (3) to strengthen gun rights, including defending abhorrent bump-stock machine guns. Perhaps most tellingly, Cato peddles climate science denial. Check out its website. There’s a long list of Supreme Court briefs, hundreds signed “Ilya Shapiro, Counsel of Record.”

But these aren't school board issues, Shapiro might protest. A facile objection. Thomas Jefferson Elementary and George Mason High School were recently renamed, a decision that had racial implications. Climate could arise as the board examines school energy use and cleaner alternatives. School safety issues could arise because of all those guns Cato so rabidly protects.

Shapiro's attempt to downplay association with the views of his employer, where his full-time job is to advocate those very views, is amusing. If that were all voters knew about Shapiro it would be unflattering enough but, of course, there's more evidence about his views—and maybe even his reasons for running for school board in the first place.

An old adage says “tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are.”

Thanks to publicly available Virginia campaign donor disclosures, anyone with an Internet connection can see who's given Shapiro money for the school board race. The list is ... enlightening.

Campaign donations to *Shapiro for Falls Church School Board* were made by individuals associated as employees or contributing speakers or writers with each of the following organizations:

- **Federalist Society:** Dedicated to ensuring U.S. courts are stocked with archly conservative judges having the right kind of...“integrity.”
- **Cato Institute:** Opposes climate science, public schools, gun restrictions, Wall Street reform, transparent elections, and campaign finance reform, among other positions.
- **Claremont Institute:** Widely known for its early, continued, and unabashed support for Trump, promotion of election lies, numerous ties to white supremacists.
- **Heartland Institute:** Defends the fracking and tobacco industries and, significantly, it's the preeminent U.S. organization pushing climate-change skepticism and denial.
- **Right-to-Work Foundation:** Advocates for the elimination of labor unions.
- **Local lobbyist for Alberta tar sands:** Tar sands, according to National Geographic, are “the world's most destructive oil.”
- **Crossroads GPS:** A Karl Rove-connected dark money swamp.
- **Maricopa County, AZ, Election Recorder:** Yes, the Recorder's office where the Arizona “audit” was conducted.
- **Friend of Heller:** A named plaintiff in the U.S. Supreme Court decision *District of Columbia v. Heller*, which upended decade's old gun law. Justice Scalia's decision, an ode to the sanctity of killing devices, was excoriated on the left and right for its judicial hypocrisy. Cato has filed a score of Supreme Court briefs urging more gun rights. As I write this, news of another school shooting fills the headlines. Behind the

gun blasts and screams, the sirens of police and ambulance, the deafening anguish of the newest bereaved parents, I hear the gun advocates: “Sincere thoughts and prayers.” As a line in the bio for a school board candidate, I haven’t yet seen it, but who knows: “Proudly promoting more guns despite the ever-rising number of child murder victims from mass school shootings.”

Donor list available from Virginia Public Access

at: https://www.vpap.org/committees/380700/top_donors/?page=1

A few more interesting observations about the campaign payments to Shapiro:

It’s curious that, in a *local and nonpolitical* school board race, nearly three-quarters of Shapiro’s contributions are large donations (over \$100), and nearly half of those, including a \$5,000 individual donation, are from out of state. To ensure he wins—to serve the kids, I’m sure.

Also curious: Shapiro’s contributions to his own campaign appear to total exactly \$0.00. By contrast, it appears that candidate Tate Gould is self-funding his entire modest campaign—\$5,000.

Between the funding approaches of the two candidates, one suggests a candidate who, if elected, wouldn’t be tempted to make school board decisions that reflect the interests of a clique of highly political out-of-town funders. Falls Church voters are now deciding who will sit on the Board, making decisions that affect their kids and community—deciding who represents their values and beliefs.

I encourage them to vote with eyes open—and to spread the word.