How Do We Change Public Policy?
A Brief Overview of The Heartland Institute’s
Choices of Tactics and Strategies

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1. The freedom philosophy

The Heartland Institute’s long-term objective is to free as many people as possible from the tyranny of others. This requires replacing public policies that limit individual freedom with policies that respect and expand individual rights and autonomy. Achieving our objective rests on popular acceptance of a series of statements of belief which, together, constitute the “freedom philosophy” espoused most notably by Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Leonard Read. Elements of that philosophy, and the myths against which it competes, include the following:

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<th>The freedom philosophy</th>
<th>Statism</th>
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<td>Government is used by interest groups to legitimize the use of force against groups less able or willing to compete for its control.</td>
<td>Government is a sympathetic ally and protector of the poor and downtrodden.</td>
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<td>Markets, in combination with private property rights and voluntary contracts, produce a self-ordering system of social order that leads to prosperity, justice, and harmony.</td>
<td>Markets are wasteful, unfair, disorderly, and often monopolized. Property rights are based on greed and promote inequality. The right to voluntary contract is subordinate to society’s interests.</td>
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<td>Society is a marvelously complex fabric of voluntary associations (families, churches, businesses, clubs, civic and service groups, etc.) organized by rights and duties that give its members opportunities to achieve their own ends, whether selfish or charitable.</td>
<td>Society is secondary historically and in legitimacy to the state. The history of society is defined by competition among social classes, which in turn are rooted in an unjust economic system.</td>
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<td>Individuals are by right autonomous beings, the overwhelming majority of whom act as rational agents to remove discomfort, help those they care about, and achieve their individual potentialities.</td>
<td>Individuals are helpless pawns of history, class, elites, or their own passions. Often uninformed, they know not their own true interests, and are easily mislead by powerful corporations and class interests.</td>
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The freedom philosophy is a way of thinking about our relationships with government, markets, and society. History teaches that the freedom philosophy is not readily found or “natural,” but grew out of its opposite: a long history of tyranny of some over others during which slavery, not freedom, was widely believed to be the natural order of things.¹ The institutions of freedom -- constitutionally limited government, the rule of law, and prohibitions on the use of force or fraud -- are likewise historically rare, new, and fragile.

2. The educational strategy

A major lesson of world history from the 1930s until sometime in the 1980s, a period when the freedom philosophy was abandoned by the great majority of intellectuals and opinion leaders and only eventually re-discovered and brought back into conventional public debate, is that being “right” isn’t enough. The truth doesn’t sell itself. Myths and falsehoods that seem intuitively true or that appeal to popular fears, prejudices, or wants can be spread far more easily and more widely than the truth.

From its beginning in 1984, The Heartland Institute has embraced an educational strategy that aims to change the minds of opinion leaders and policymakers. We believe that “ideas have consequences,” that once a critical fraction of the general population embraces the freedom philosophy, other efforts such as lobbying, grassroots organizing, and politics will be effective means of implementing it. But unless and until minds are changed, these other strategies will fall short.

What, specifically, do we mean by an “educational strategy”? How do we bring people to embrace these ideas? Key elements of a successful approach include the following:

A. People are “rationally ignorant” about many issues and ideas unless they are so interesting or entertaining that acquiring them for these reasons alone pays.

Preaching to people about an ideology without any direct connection with their day-to-day social and economic problems will fail to reach all but a very small (but influential) percentage of the population. At any given time, a small part of the population is open to new ways of thinking because their personal experiences pre-condition them to want to challenge prevailing wisdom and speculate about alternatives. These people react to the ideological message with an “ah ha!” experience, rather than gradually embrace it over time through careful reasoning, pragmatism, or

¹See Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Civilization* (New York: Basic Books) for a compelling account of how the experience of slavery gave rise to those ideas and emotions about freedom that we (following the Founding Fathers) tend to assume are self-evident.
conformity. But these people are the exception, not the rule. Because the leaders of groups devoted to freedom tend to be people of this type, they often mistakenly believe other people think as they do, and will have a similar intellectual experience.

The lesson is not that our message always needs to be closely linked to the reader’s self-interest, because such a tactic makes the advocates of freedom appear to be motivated only by selfishness. Rather, we should seek ways to make our ideas “so interesting or entertaining that acquiring [them] for these reasons alone pays.” As Mancur Olson goes on to write, “this situation appears to be the single most important source of exceptions to the generalization that typical citizens are rationally ignorant about public affairs.”

B. We must target highly leveraged individuals and find ways to make it in their self-interest to carry our message to millions of readers or viewers.

We cannot afford to directly communicate with more than a tiny fraction of the general population. Journalists and radio show hosts are obvious examples of highly leveraged individuals; by filling their need for immediate access to experts, sound-bites, and informed opinions, we can “hitch a ride” on their newspapers and radio waves to reach millions of people. Elected officials (who are constantly in the news and giving speeches) are also highly leveraged, besides being in the position to introduce bills and vote correctly.

The Internet enables us to reach large audiences, but not without effective marketing. Competition for “eye balls” is already intense on that medium and will get more so over time. Unique and constantly updated Web site content, metatags geared to the inner workings of the most popular search engines, “viral e-mail,” e-newsletters, and constant advertising in print publications are ways to reach large audiences on the Internet.

C. The message must be presented in ways that are compelling to a new generation that thinks differently than those of the past.

We know that newspapers and magazines are being increasingly displaced by network television and radio, and more recently by cable and the Internet, as sources of news and information. The

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new information technologies are trending away from the written word,\textsuperscript{4} and hence from “linear” (or critical) thinking and deductive reasoning, toward images and sounds, “nonlinear” (or emotional) impressions and feelings, and inductive reasoning (inferences from what we think we know or have seen). This presents a unique challenge to libertarians because many of its tenets run contrary to first appearances (“the seen versus the unseen”) and its greatest works of political economy have been deductive rather than inductive (e.g., \textit{Human Action}).

The ability of digital technology to create extremely realistic but false images undermines the reliability of inference and makes it easily manipulated. Recent demonstrations of this ability include the fleeing peasant girl holding a cat in the movie “Wag the Dog,” and paraplegic actor Christopher Reeves appearing to walk in a commercial aired during the 2000 NFL Superbowl. Nearly every documentary and magazine photo-spread on environmental issues misleads by presenting highly realistic \textit{but non-representative} images of environmental degradation. Critical thinking skills are needed to expose the fraud, and the leaders of environmental groups assume, with growing confidence, that their audiences lack these skills.

Faced with such an audience, we cannot rely only on the written word to convey our message. This is a major challenge for libertarian leaders, for whom demonstrating a mastery of the written literature of the freedom philosophy is a major career asset. There is a less-than-random probability that the current-day leadership of libertarian organizations includes individuals who are the best suited to overseeing the \textit{translation} of our ideas into the new media.

At a minimum we must create “photo ops” and make greater use of graphics, photos, and audio and video clips to make our message suitably exciting and visually compelling for electronic media. In the short term, so long as vestiges of old media still dominate the new media, this will be sufficient to remain competitive. The traditional distinction between content and marketing can be sustained.

In the longer term we must realize that a large part of the audience will \textit{never} go beyond the emotional and inferential level of the message. What we call “marketing” will \textit{become} the message for all but a tiny fraction of the population. Therefore, some if not all libertarian groups must create panoramas of compelling audio and visual images that support the freedom philosophy, not as part of their “marketing programs,” but as a replacement for some or all of their traditional publications and communications programs.

\textsuperscript{4} This trend has received less attention than it deserves because the Internet initially was text only, and today most think tanks and advocacy groups still view it as a cost-effective and rapid way to distribute texts containing their ideas. But the Internet is fast converging with television, and in the future it could become as odd to read on-line as it is today to read text on a television screen. The Internet may have \textit{postponed} progress among libertarians in finding ways to express our ideas in images and sounds rather than words. Note the relative scarcity of libertarian-themed movies in the late 1990s.
For millions of people, these images will constitute the main reason for their sympathy toward the freedom philosophy, just as a different set of images now motivates them to embrace one form or another of statism.

D. **Mainstream media are generally hostile or indifferent to our ideas and message, and they will not allow us to use them to carry our message to a larger audience.**

Many journalists, even those who work for small newspapers, adhere to a set of ideas that are basically opposed to the freedom philosophy. We must recognize (and convey to our supporters) that it is far easier for left-liberal groups to get press coverage than organizations from the conservative-libertarian perspective. Moreover, the old cliche that “any news coverage is good” or “just so long as they spell our name right” is false: It is better to avoid mainstream media outlets if it is likely your effort will simply be ridiculed or demonized by those outlets. Effort is better spent cultivating relationships with alternative media outlets that are more friendly to the message.

To the extent that it is not wise to completely avoid hostile media outlets, we need to follow their rules closely: Hold well-organized and carefully scripted news conferences, featuring the most credible spokesmen available. Send well-written and timely news releases with the images and attachments they need to supplement their coverage. Coax and persuade reluctant reporters to cover us. Respond to inaccurate or unfriendly coverage with phone calls and personal letters to the reporters involved.

Our greatest tactical vulnerability in the eyes of mainstream journalists is corporate funding, since for many reporters this puts us on the side of the “black hats.” A second vulnerability is that we are predictable, which to an op-ed page editor means we are no longer entertaining, and to a reporter it means we have an “agenda” and are no longer a reliable source of facts or experts. Hiding our funding sources and/or becoming “unpredictable” are not options that can be pursued, at least not successfully in the long run. The best we can do is diversify our funding base -- groups such as The

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Survey data show 80 percent or more of reporters are self-identified liberals, oppose gun rights, voted for the reelection of Bill Clinton, etc. Reasons for this bias include: a disproportionate number of journalists come from high-income backgrounds and graduate from Ivy League schools with left-wing faculties; pay and job conditions at newspapers and television stations are very poor, so the best and brightest quickly leave the profession; the political left understands the value of controlling media outlets and is therefore attracted to the profession, stays in it longest, and has created rewards and other forms of recognition to indoctrinate new entrants in the field; the need to “tell a story with a moral” dominates how the news is reported, and often leads reporters to define corporations and other agents of creative destruction as “black hats” while government and advocacy groups that represent groups opposed to economic change are labeled “good guys.” See John Leo, “Those darned readers,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 24, 2000, p. 16.
Heritage Foundation have done this extremely well with direct mail -- and disavow partisan labels.

E. **People and the media have a deep interest in personal accounts of tragedy or success against the odds.**

   One way to make knowledge of public policy “so interesting or entertaining that acquiring it for these reasons alone pays” is to put a human face on the problem (or solution). This tactic has been used extremely well by the left, but to date has only rarely been used effectively by conservatives and libertarians. The Heritage Foundation (profiles of successful civil society institutions), the Institute for Justice (profiles of victims of occupational licensing laws), the National Center for Public Policy Research (profiles of the victims of environmental regulations), and Children First America (founders of private scholarship programs and beneficiaries of the same) have made significant progress in this regard, though.

   We need to find and feature heroes of free enterprise and victims of government excesses to generate greater attention to our underlying message. This is, once again, especially hard for libertarians because the tendencies we defend operate anonymously and are unseen while the political left is able to announce grants, cut ribbons, profile grant recipients, etc. Leading libertarian thinkers resisted personalizing the message because focusing on individual winners and losers means taking the debate to an inductive level, where we are more likely to lose.

   One way to make the task last intimidating is to focus on promoting heros and villains that other groups, such as those listed above, have already discovered. We don’t necessarily need more heros or villains. We only need to focus more attention to those that have been identified. This can be done by publishing interviews, op-eds, feature stories, and news stories in our publications and by hosting events.

F. **People are deeply skeptical about politics and politicians, so attaching our ideas to political parties or to individual sympathetic elected officials doesn’t work.**

   A consequence of the educational efforts of libertarian think tanks over the years, and also the failure of socialist regimes in the U.S. and abroad, has been to discredit politics and politicians. The result is a growing cynicism about politics in general, reflected in falling voter turn out levels, polls showing politicians to be among the least respected and trusted professions in the nation, disrespectful references to politicians in media, etc.

   The rise of cynicism poses a special problem for libertarians. To rebut many of the statist myths identified on page one of this memo, libertarianism needed to delegitimize government and elected officials. Opinion polls say this has been accomplished: most people believe “too much government”
is the biggest problem facing the nation, and politicians rank near the bottom of lists of professions in terms of trustworthiness. But the unintended consequence of this victory is an alienated and rationally ignorant public that won’t turn out to vote in sufficient numbers to defeat statist candidates.

In a two-way political race where only 50 percent of registered voters actually vote, the winning candidate needs the support of only 26 percent of registered voters. Nearly 15 percent of all nonagricultural civilian workers in the U.S. and over 25 percent of African Americans are employed by governments. Government workers and their spouses, their friends, and the network of private companies that contract with governments form a voting block that probably easily exceeds the 26 percent threshold in many communities. They can win elections, in other words, without a single liberal casting a vote for their candidates.

Our message clearly needs to be different from what it was 20 years ago. While we must continue to avoid the appearance of being part of politics as usual (by emphasizing that we are nonpartisan, not bipartisan), we should carefully avoid denigrating the act of participating in political society as voters, candidates, or campaign volunteers. Cultural conservatives – the so-called Religious Right – have a far better record than libertarians in this regard: They have never shied away from urging their members to be politically active, even as preach a social gospel that denies the state a significant role in man’s moral redemption.

We must also avoid activities and messages that feed cynicism and so, however unintentionally, weaken the political forces for positive reform. Name-calling and personal attacks on elected officials contribute to cynicism and discourage qualified individuals from running for office. Sweeping allegations of corruption in government or any statement that begins “what’s the use” or “it hardly matters” are counterproductive to the freedom philosophy. So too are statements to the effect that market-based reforms that don’t go “far enough” ought to be rejected, when the alternative is not greater freedom but preservation of the status quo. This final mistake is frequently committed by libertarian critics of school vouchers such as Marshall Fritz and Lew Rockwell.

G. Pervasive ignorance about basic economic principles means we cannot assume a familiarity with how the economy works.

As Friedrich Hayek has said, debates over even the most basic of economic principles, such as free trade, are never settled because they are constantly under assault by interest groups and seemingly

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at odds with common appearances. Often they are simply forgotten from one generation to the next, since we lack a system analogous to what the political left has in the universities and newsrooms of a reliable method of indoctrinating successive generations of opinion leaders.

Hence, we need to be constantly, though gently, reminding readers about basic economic rules in the context of our commentaries on the issues of the day. Some of those rules include the mutual benefits of free trade, the deadweight loss to society of taxes, the futility of minimum wage laws and other types of price controls, and the voluntary nature of exchange versus the coercive nature of government.

H. Information directed to elected officials is filtered by a small number of liberal magazines and newspapers that refuse to report our work.

Separate from the task of reaching a large part of the general public is the challenge of communicating with elected officials. From an educational perspective, the key question is: Where do they get their information from? National elected officials and their staffs rely on The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, CNN, and the major news networks. State elected officials rely mainly on newspapers, usually their hometown daily or weekly and the major-circulation dailies in their state.

As mentioned earlier, these media outlets are often hostile to our perspective, leaving us with a major problem. This situation is common knowledge and is usually cited when calling on activists to write letters to the editors of major newspapers. But this is a weak palliative: hostile editors select letters for their entertainment value and edit them with a free hand. Elected officials, like the rest of us, attribute more importance to a news story than to a letter to the editor or an op-ed.

There is a second way to react to this finding: elected officials read newspapers because newspapers are uniquely suited to meeting their information needs. A busy elected official can scan a newspaper in 10 minutes, reading headlines, opening paragraphs, and pull-quotes, and feel reasonably convinced he or she is “up to speed” on the news of the day. Newspapers are written, edited, and designed to make information about current events “so interesting and entertaining that acquiring it for these reasons alone pays.”

The lesson is this: make your publications look and read more like newspapers, and less like policy studies or op-eds, and elected officials will read them.

This was the rationale for creating Heartland’s three monthly publications, School Reform News, School Reform News, School Reform News.

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Environment & Climate News, and Health Care News. Each goes to every state and national elected official in the U.S., some 8,000 names, along with Heartland supporters, allies, and grassroots activists who ask to be on the mailing list. The first two publications now go to 45,000 people every month.

I. Our need to be timely in responding to current controversies has led us to adopt a “scattershot” approach to public policy issues.

This, in turn, alienates us from many policy makers and persons (who say they are) interested in pragmatic solutions rather than ideology or sound bites. We will be accused of not staying in the debate on any particular issue long enough to make a difference, of not developing sufficient expertise in one area to be compelling, and of putting ideology ahead of facts.

The criticism is legitimate. We risk being beaten when our generalists debate the other side’s specialists (such as teacher union spokespeople), and our credibility in areas where libertarian ideas are popular (e.g., school reform) is sometimes compromised by our positions on issues that are unpopular (e.g., drug legalization). Still, there is an offsetting benefit to the generalist’s approach: because the generalist doesn’t lose sight, through the thicket of data and arcane legislative history, of the most important facts and values at stake in a debate, he or she can often make the most effective arguments and pose the most promising solutions.\(^8\)

The criticism is inevitable so long as single-issue organizations do not exist to carry on the advocacy in our place. It is possible that the very existence of large multi-issue think tanks discourages the formation of single-issue groups; this must be worked out by funders and the heads of the large groups. Until then it is unfair to criticize think tanks for trying to address too many issues, when their very purpose is to fight for freedom wherever the threat of tyranny appears.

3. The roads not taken: Lobbying, grassroots organizing, and politics.

When The Heartland Institute chose the educational strategy, it rejected lobbying, politics, and grassroots organizing as the most effective ways to change public policy. Why?

Until people’s attitudes toward governments, markets, and society change, lobbying efforts will consist primarily of “putting out fires” instead of going on the offensive. Our opponents have more at stake in the political debate, measured by dollars and political power, than we do, and therefore come to this arena better funded and prepared to wage long-term campaigns. Pro-freedom lobbying

\(^8\) So Friedrich Hayek observed in his 1944 essay, “On Being an Economist,” supra note 7.
organizations usually rely on under-funded ad hoc coalitions that must be laboriously reinvented each legislative season. Our side may win many battles, but almost assuredly would lose the war if not part of a larger effort that includes an educational strategy.

Similarly, grassroots organizing efforts will be successful following, rather than preceding, a widespread public understanding of why freedom is desirable. Without first changing the way people think, a grassroots organization will pull in the direction a majority of its members want, not in the direction of freedom. The example is extreme, but consider the socialist workers movement in Germany in the 1940s, the basis of the Nazi Party.

Educational and lobbying strategies can be integrated, when educational efforts are aimed at informing and motivating persons who could eventually become members of a successful grassroots organization. When Heartland re-launched School Reform News in 1999 and Environment & Climate News in early 2000, it saw the monthly newspapers as a way to educate members of potential grassroots movements for school choice and free-market environmentalism, even though both newspapers started as part of a pure education campaign directed at elected officials. The tabloid newspaper layout that works so well with elected officials is also well-suited to communicating to a larger audience due to low production cost.

Advancing the freedom philosophy through politics, whether of the third party type or by working with the major parties, is most difficult before a widespread change in public opinion due to the nature of the playing field. Incumbents have fundraising advantages over challengers than only personally wealthy candidates are able to overcome. Media bias ensures unfavorable coverage in major media markets. While liberal candidates can often win simply by mobilizing their base of government employees and their relatives, conservative and libertarian candidates find few established networks already in place willing to work for their election.

The rules of politics, including those affecting ballot access and access to debates and candidate forums, are decidedly biased against third party candidates, candidates with strong ideologies, and candidates without effective campaign organizations built up over several years and at great cost. Such candidates are most likely to be “citizen politicians” and libertarians.

The political left, finally, seems to have a natural advantage in the area of candidate recruitment. The skills that mark a good politician -- an ability to echo the opinions of others, a glibness about making promises and predictions, and an absence of scruples about taking credit for deeds done with other people’s money -- seem common among persons who fill petit bureaucracies such as school boards, park boards, and local government advisory panels. They are quickly introduced to the political career ladder of running for successively higher offices. Since few such people are likely to be successful in business or other professional careers, their opportunity costs (what they give up) for choosing a career of “public service” is quite low.

-10-
4. Measuring success

We fight against overwhelming odds and rely for funding on a necessarily small group of principled individuals willing to overlook the free rider problem inherent in a free-market advocacy effort. Still, to improve our efforts over time we must find ways to measure progress toward our goal of changing the minds of a critical fraction of the general public.

There is a temptation to measure inputs rather than outputs. Inputs include how many copies of various publications are given away (did anyone read them? did they impact their opinions?) and how much money was raised and spent. Better evidence of progress includes the following:

1. Surveys and feedback from key audiences. Testimonials from policy makers, reporters, donors, other policy organizations, and academics (probably in this order of priority) reveals whether minds and policies are being changed because of our efforts. Attendance at events is also proof of our influence.

2. Number of requests for information. PolicyFax and PolicyBot enable us to track these with a high degree of reliability. Follow-up surveys and calls enable us to learn why and how people use our publications.

3. Number of visitors and hits on our Web site. Heartland’s Web site automatically records the number of visitors and number of pages they view, as well as give us some idea (not a good one) of what professions these visitors represent.

4. Newspaper clippings and radio and television coverage. These can be tracked, month-to-month changes reported, and total population reached estimated. But notice that over-reliance on this measure means allowing our opponents, the liberal media, to determine our success.

5. Number of financial supporters. This reveals the number of people who are so convinced by our message and our effectiveness at conveying it that they are willing to help finance the effort. Comparisons among organizations is misleading, though, because it does not control for differences in the amount of resources devoted to fundraising or the popularity of the issues the organizations address.

6. Sale of publications. This too reveals the number of people willing to pay for our research and publications, even though they may not agree with our ideology. Same reservation applies as in number 4.

7. Changes to public policy. In the final analysis, actual changes to public policy are the test of our effectiveness. The defeat of tax increase proposals, passage of educational choice reforms, and other real-world policy decisions that can be attributed via testimonials to our work are evidence
that we are having a short-term. But even this, what would seem to be the plainest measure of success, can be problematic. Have we chosen to focus on changes to public policy now, rather than in the long-term? Have we merely softened the edges of bad policy, thereby making it less likely that the public would oppose and defeat it (or vote for the political opposition of its sponsors)? Are we “making socialism efficient”?

Heartland tries to monitor all seven outputs and report them to donors regularly and thoroughly in the monthly Heartlander newsletter. At times this can be embarrassing, as when orders from PolicyFax fail to rise or media coverage dips. Nevertheless, we believe our supporters deserve to know how we are progressing by these important measures, and this requires accurate reporting of trends and baselines, not just isolated “victories” and good news.

5. Conclusion

The Heartland Institute was the nation’s first free-market public policy institute that focused on a single state’s public policy issues. In our early years we expanded our work to include six Midwest states, but otherwise simply imitated what the larger “beltway” think tanks did: policy studies, op-eds, conferences, etc. For the past seven years, though, we’ve deliberately moved “outside the box” again and again to become more effective. In the process, we have learned how to get our message out to a much larger and more influential audience.

Heartland’s approach to changing public policy necessarily produces fewer short-term victories than a lobbying effort and lower numbers of “members” than a grassroots organizing effort. Our scattershot approach exposes us to criticism that we are not “serious” participants in the public policy debate. And because some degree of ideological agreement is a condition of becoming a member/contributor to The Heartland Institute, we are criticized for not mobilizing grassroots support for our positions.

In our defense, and by way of a conclusion, I say the following:

! In the long run, winning the “war” against statism requires changing the minds of millions of people. It is not enough to win temporary victories in the legislative arena, particularly if doing so diverts attention and funds from the more important, long-term battle.

! Our members/contributors may be few in number (about 1,000) but they are genuine converts to our cause and will be with the organization in the long term. Heartland’s fundraising costs are among the lowest in the think tank world.

! Our participation in the public policy debate is fully as “serious” as that of most other participants.
Politicians give scant attention to facts or experiences in other states, and community activists invariably speak with a great deal of empathy for their members but little understanding of basic economic principles. Who is to say who is most serious?

Heartland is not a grassroots organization. It relies on face-to-face solicitations for most of its funds, and has an agenda that is not determined by a majority vote of its members/contributors. But the truth is not something that should be voted on at annual membership meetings. It is, rather, something that the brightest among us have glimpsed, and we invite others to join us in its pursuit.

The Heartland Institute will continue to evolve institutionally to meet the demands of changing marketplaces for ideas and funds. We welcome your advice and suggestions. Please send them to Joseph Bast, president, The Heartland Institute, 19 South LaSalle, Suite 903, Chicago, IL 60603, or by e-mail to jbast@heartland.org