



Seed Round for Liberty: Cato's Innovation Project

By Audrey Grayson

The Cato Institute is looking for libertarian entrepreneurs and innovators you haven't heard of—yet.

As the Cato Institute approaches its 50th anniversary, its leaders are asking a pointed question: What if some of the most important libertarian thinkers of the next generation aren't involved in public policy now?

They might be shipping software in Austin, building a business in rural Ohio, or writing on Substack for a few thousand readers. They may have never applied to work at a think tank. They may not even

know Cato is looking for them.

That's precisely the problem the new **Cato Innovation Project** is designed to solve.

Rather than posting job descriptions and waiting for familiar faces to apply, Cato is inverting the model. The program offers up to three two-year paid fellowships—starting at \$100,000 annually with full benefits and dedicated project budgets—to individuals who submit their own original proposals

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for advancing individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace. Cato isn’t defining the job. The applicant is.

The logic is borrowed directly from the market principles Cato has championed for decades. Capitalism rewards entrepreneurs because decentralized competition surfaces information that no central planner can gather. Applying that same reasoning internally, Cato is wagering that the ideas it hasn’t thought of yet are exactly the ones it most needs.

“The best idea for liberty might be one Cato hasn’t thought of. We intend to find the person who has—and give them the

resources to run with it,” says Peter Goettler, president and CEO of the Cato Institute.

The program is candid about what success looks like and what it doesn’t. Most innovation fellows, by design, won’t become permanent Cato employees. Smart failure is built into the model. The real return on investment will be determined by testing ideas that will better equip the institution for a volatile policy environment.

For the right fellow, the two years could become a career. Cato will evaluate each project at the end of its term for conversion to a permanent role, making the fellowship not just a proving ground for ideas but also a potential on-ramp for new talent to call the Institute home.

The timing reflects a genuine inflection point. Forty-five percent of Americans now identify as politically independent—the highest share ever recorded. These are voters skeptical of both parties, increasingly alienated from a government that has expanded under administrations of every stripe. The audience for a serious, principled liberty movement has never been larger.

The Innovation Project is an attempt to change that, one unconventional proposal at a time. ✨

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Applications and FAQs are available at cato.org/innovation.