

Libertarianism and Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Tea Party: 5 Questions for Cato Institute Executive Vice President David Boaz

October 15th, 2010

With the 2010 midterms approaching and many polls showing voters want the government to intervene less in people's lives, we asked David Boaz, Executive Vice President of the libertarian **Cato Institute** and author of Britannica's entry on **libertarianism** and **Libertarianism: A Primer**, to break down what libertarianism is and what libertarians believe. He also weighed in on some thorny issues, such as whether or not a libertarian can be pro-life, same-sex marriage, and the **Tea Party movement**.

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Britannica: Can you begin by explaining briefly what **libertarianism** is for our readers who may not be familiar with the term?

Boaz: The Britannica entry defines libertarianism as a "political philosophy that takes individual liberty to be the primary political value." In interviews, I often say that libertarianism is the idea that adult individuals have the right and the responsibility to make the important decisions about their own lives. In practical terms, libertarians favor smaller government, less spending, lower taxes, free trade, protection of civil liberties, personal freedom, and a less interventionist approach to defense and foreign affairs. We celebrate civil society, free association, and the social progress that they generate, and we seek strict limits on the size, scope, and power of government in order to maximize freedom.

Britannica: Capitalism is a system in which inequalities in wealth are inevitable—some people will thrive while others won't. What is proper role of government, and what should government do to protect those who do not thrive? For example, are unemployment insurance and Medicaid-type programs appropriate?

Boaz: Inequalities in wealth are inevitable in all economic systems. In fact, the **Economic Freedom of the World** report finds that the share of national income going to the poorest 10 percent of the population is remarkably stable no matter what the degree of economic freedom in the country (see exhibit 1.9). What does vary is the absolute income of the poorest 10 percent, which is much higher in countries with more freedom (exhibit 1.10). Socialist states had and have huge hidden inequalities of wealth. Differences in access to privileges were staggering—special stores, hospitals, dachas and so on for party members that ordinary people could not enter, access to international travel and literature, etc. And all that in regimes that were officially dedicated to equality, in which inequality was "forbidden." If inequality is inevitable, it's better to have a system that gives people incentives to invent, innovate, and produce more goods and services for the whole society.

People live best when government is restricted to protecting individual rights, leaving all the rest of life to the voluntary choices of billions of people. The most important way that people get out of



poverty is through the economic growth that happens when markets are free. Also fundamental is the family, which supports and sustains individuals and makes lots of very personal and nuanced income transfers. Then you have self-help and mutual aid organizations, which were prominent in society before the rise of the welfare state. And then there are charitable organizations. Only if you expect all those institutions to fail should you consider having the government take money by force from some people and transfer it to others. And I would argue that the vast expanse of welfare and transfer programs have not only led every Western country to the verge of bankruptcy, they have trapped the poor in institutional dependency. Indeed, poverty declined steadily in the United States until the **Great Society**, after which it leveled off. We would have more growth, a higher standard of living, and less multi-generational poverty if we eliminated harmful government transfer programs and turned instead to economic freedom, family, self-help, mutual aid, and charity.

Britannica: Rand Paul, the Republican senatorial candidate from Kentucky, who is identified with the both the Tea Party movement and libertarianism, got in trouble earlier this year when he criticized some elements of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which mandated what private business could and couldn't do, specifically saying that they could not discriminate on the basis of race. Was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 consistent with a libertarian's view of what government should and shouldn't do?

Boaz: Among any group who share a political philosophy there are radicals and moderates, philosophers and practitioners, and other differences. Libertarians generally believe that government should not coercively interfere with freedom of association and the way people arrange their private affairs. No one should be forbidden from contracting with another, or required to do so. And thus libertarians do generally reject laws intended to ban discrimination by private businesses and individuals. We defend private property and free association as firmly as we do free speech, even though we know that any freedom can be abused. In the aftermath of Rand Paul's comments, some libertarians—including the **eminent legal scholar Randy Barnett**—argued that the historical context of government-supported racial discrimination in the United States did require a governmental response: that after 300 years of slavery, **Jim Crow** laws, and the Supreme Court's refusal to grant African Americans either liberty or equal protection of the law, the Civil Rights Act was not an interference in a previously free market, it was an attempt to counter a comprehensive government policy of discrimination.

Britannica: Abortion and same-sex marriage are two hot button issues in the United States. In a piece **you wrote earlier this year**, you talked about pro-choice libertarians being more supportive of Barack Obama while pro-life libertarians were more likely to back the Republicans. Can a true libertarian favor a constitutional amendment to prohibit abortion or favor legislation prohibiting same-sex marriage?

Boaz: There's no libertarian pope, so I hesitate to excommunicate people for not being "true libertarians." I do think a libertarian can believe that the proper role of government is to protect the rights of life, liberty, and property, and interpret that to include protecting the life of the unborn child. American libertarians tend to prefer federalism and would thus probably prefer to leave the decision on abortion and other possible crimes to the states; but that's not a first principle. Most libertarians believe that the woman's right to control her body should prevail, but some do think the state should protect the potential life of a fetus.

Marriage is a different matter. The best libertarian answer is to **separate marriage and the state**. But in our current world, with government involved in every nook and cranny of legal and economic life, that's hard to achieve. So I'd say the libertarian answer in this society is that **laws should apply equally to all**, including marriage laws.

Britannica: Polls indicate that about 15% to 20% of the American public hold beliefs that could be classified as libertarian, and in your research paper titled "**The Libertarian Vote in the Age of Obama**," you note that such people swing back between backing Republicans and backing Democrats. With neither party a wholly comfortable fit for libertarians, how would you like to see the libertarian movement develop to really capture this segment of the population? As a third party?

Boaz: The challenge is to get those 15 percent—or even the 44 percent of Americans who say they

are “fiscally conservative and socially liberal, also known as libertarian”—to actually know, understand, and use the word “libertarian.” That’s a big job, when the political and media worlds are firmly committed to the idea of the liberal-conservative spectrum. Third parties don’t fare very well in the United States, so most organized libertarians work in one of the major parties, in issue campaigns, or in nonpolitical areas like academia, think tanks, and journalism. Libertarians should do a better job of persuading those Americans who generally like both personal and economic freedom—who like the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the economic revolution of the 1980s—that they are in fact part of the broad libertarian community. But it’s tough going. We may just have to keep developing and advancing libertarian ideas while enjoying the **broad libertarian consensus in American society** without actually getting credit for it!

Britannica: What is your impression of the **Tea Party movement**, and how well do the view of Tea Party activists and sympathizers mesh with those of libertarians?

Boaz: The Tea Party is a thoroughly decentralized movement, and it’s hard to pin down just where its many members and local organizations actually stand. But if you take the Tea Party Patriots’ slogan, “Fiscal Responsibility, Limited Government, Free Market,” that’s a pretty libertarian set of principles. The tea party is not a libertarian movement, but (at this point at least) it is a libertarian force in American politics. It’s organizing Americans to come out in the streets, confront politicians, and vote on the issues of spending, deficits, debt, the size and scope of government, and the constitutional limits on government. That’s a good thing. And if many of the tea partiers do hold socially conservative views (not all of them do), then it’s a good thing for the American political system and for American freedom to keep them focused on shrinking the size and cost of the federal government. Besides, even as the tea party grows, several states have implemented marriage equality and California just decriminalized marijuana (and may actually legalize it on election day), so there’s a definite libertarian trend going on.

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