



Is There a Libertarian Case for Bernie Sanders?

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With the only remotely libertarian GOP candidate out of the 2016 race, should the liberty movement should start feeling the Bern?

Now that Rand Paul has exited the race, who should libertarians consider throwing their support behind? It might be the last candidate you'd ever think libertarians would support.

For liberty-loving individuals who value personal freedoms as much as economic freedoms, the pickings are slim among the remaining GOP candidates.

Marco Rubio's combination of heavy-handed social conservatism and nostalgia for Bush-era war policy is an obvious turnoff. Donald Trump's toxic cocktail of xenophobic populism, economic protectionism, and desire to Make War Crimes Great Again offers little for libertarians—especially the younger set who value an inclusive society.

Chris Christie is the sort of brutish big-government conservative the liberty crowd have come to loathe, especially when he name-drops "9/11" as license for an aggressive surveillance state. Ben Carson is Ben Carson, complete with bizarre right-wing opinions. John Kasich is a middling tax-and-spend bureaucrat. Jeb Bush is inextricably tied to his hawkish brother's disastrous adventurism abroad. And Carly Fiorina and Jim Gilmore are nonentities.

Wannabe televangelist Ted Cruz, meanwhile, has tried to woo libertarians away from the Paul crowd, but, to some, he's really nothing more than a diet version of Trump. His immigration views parrot a decidedly un-libertarian, nativist line and would require ample government spending to implement; his foreign policy, while not quite John McCain-levels of bloodthirsty, includes resistance to defense spending cuts and the desire to "carpet-bomb" Syria into oblivion; and he openly courts the most hateful pastors on the right with views on gay marriage and the Kim Davis saga deeply rooted in sheer hostility.

After Paul's dropout, "all we've got left are neoconservatives, social conservatives, and crony capitalists," Terry Michael, a former DNC spokesman turned libertarian, told The Daily

Beast. “I’d love to hear anyone tell me that any of the current crop of Republicans are actually libertarian on foreign policy or social issues or even many economic issues.”

On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton represents the stereotypical libertarian nightmare: a relentlessly power-hungry technocrat who acts on behalf of moneyed interests and seemingly abuses power at every turn.

So that brings us to Bernie Sanders.

The self-described “democratic socialist” will coast to a primary victory Tuesday in the nation’s most libertarian-friendly state. Thus far Sanders has run the campaign libertarian icon Ron Paul did in 2008, and one that Rand Paul should have—a campaign focused on coalescing young voters against Big Government, Big War, and Big Business.

While Sanders’ economic policies deeply conflict with libertarians—single-payer health care, government-funded college tuition for all, etc.—he is their only remaining ally on a slew of other big issues.

And, besides, “there’s this little thing called Congress,” as Michael noted. “Any radical law he tries to pass will run through an obstacle course.”

So the logic goes: With a Republican-controlled Congress—or one remotely close to its current makeup—President Sanders would have a tough time getting his most radical economic policies passed, leaving him to fight for the civil liberties causes that matter to liberals and libertarians alike: e.g., reforms to the criminal justice system, the ongoing drug war, and the government’s surveillance efforts.

In other words, backing a Sanders presidency would mean wagering that Sanders’ most left-wing economic policies wouldn’t come to fruition. And that he’d pull a conservative Congress to the left on civil liberties issues, with the help of cross-partisan allies like Sens. Rand Paul and Mike Lee.

“Where’s the evidence that he could get bipartisan support for [those issues]?” countered a skeptical David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute. “We’ve got a Republican Congress and a Democratic president now, and those things aren’t moving.”

Nick Gillespie, the editor-in-chief of libertarian outpost Reason.com (and a regular Beast contributor), while also skeptical, doesn’t hold quite the same reservations.

“You could do worse than having Bernie Sanders in the White House,” he admitted. “The things that he would be able to direct in the White House would accord with libertarian values. Being a commander-in-chief, he would minister our foreign policy much differently than Obama or Bush; he would be much more likely change the scheduling for marijuana, which the president can do; and he’d be in a much better position to push criminal justice reform.”

Indeed, a number of libertarians seem willing to take Sanders’ more agreeable positions piecemeal, rather than suffer through another Republican who upholds and expands state power for favored institutions like the military and law enforcement.

“I like [Sanders’] view on police accountability and corruption,” New Hampshire-based libertarian activist J.P. Freeman told the *Burlington Free Press*. “The government control, their front line is the cops. It starts with local police.”

It’s safe to say, however, that the majority of libertarians will not feel the Bern this election season.

“You can't be good on some social issues but want to fund them through increased taxation or income redistribution,” said Carla Gericke, president of the Free State Project, which recruits libertarians to move to New Hampshire in order to eventually take control of the state.

“Libertarians are better off voting for toothbrushes and ponies than any of the frontrunners. Or better yet, why not vote for nobody?”

But the fact that libertarians would even entertain the idea of voting for an avowed “socialist” like Bernie Sanders shows just how disaffected the movement has become.

Ultimately, come November, when looking to the two major parties, many libertarians will likely find themselves in a familiar predicament: politically homeless with no one to vote for.