



Is the Libertarian Party the moderate alternative in today's America?

Ted Galen Carpenter

September 20, 2016

The 2016 US presidential campaign, already noteworthy for the flamboyant and controversial ability of Donald Trump to capture the Republican Party nomination, is markedly different for another reason. The Libertarian Party (LP), which has been on the fringes of American politics since its formation more than four decades ago (typically winning about 0.5% of the vote in presidential elections) is playing a much more significant role this time. Depending on how the questions are phrased and the makeup of the survey sample, the ticket of former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson and former Massachusetts Governor William Weld poll between 7-13%, usually clustering around 9-10%.

Most political observers attribute that much stronger support to two factors. One is that the LP has nominated two figures with serious records of achievement instead of some of the rank (and occasionally bizarre) outsiders that it chose in other years. But that factor cannot fully account for the surge of support. After all, Gary Johnson was the party's nominee in 2012 (with a different running mate) and although he did better than previous LP candidates by receiving 1.2 million votes, he narrowly failed to pierce the 1% level. Clearly, something has changed.

The majority of experts attribute the sharp rise of support for the Johnson-Weld ticket to the unprecedented level of public dissatisfaction with both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Polling data may support that thesis, since the disapproval rating for Clinton has risen to 58, while for Trump it has remained around 64%. There is indeed a lot of public disgust with the nominees of both major parties, and that undoubtedly contributes to the search for a third-party alternative. With two very respectable figures on their ticket, the LP was well positioned to take advantage.

However, there are indications that public dissatisfaction goes much deeper than the revulsion over the 2016 Republican and Democratic presidential nominees. The two major parties are increasingly polarized on some key domestic issues, making the concept of political compromise almost unthinkable. Abortion is the most obvious issue, but the polarization has bled over into an entire range of social and economic issues. Appointments to the Supreme Court, and increasingly even lower courts, are now subject to strict political and ideological litmus tests. The idea of nominating a quality jurist who will simply do his or her best to apply the law as the facts of a particular case indicate, has now become a quaint, obsolete notion for the dominant elites in both major parties. Yet, except for movement zealots, that is likely what a majority of Americans seek. The LP offers the hope of fresh appointees without the extensive baggage of political and ideological obligations.

A different kind of polarization has taken place on the issue of national security. While prominent Republicans and Democrats will happily engage in partisan sniping, the reality is that there is very little difference in the substance of the policies that the elites of both parties embrace. Although Trump himself has made some statements suggesting that he is a bit of a maverick (calling NATO “obsolete,” for example), most of the GOP and the bulk of the Democratic Party leadership remain firmly wedded to the status quo. And that status quo is one of high levels of military spending, maintaining (and where possible, expanding) Washington’s alliances, and intervening militarily around the world in conflicts that have little or no connection to America’s vital interests. Moreover, one must wonder about Trump’s supposed maverick tendencies when he pledges a new campaign to destroy ISIS in record time and end the budget sequester provisions so that the already generously funded Pentagon can get even more money. Conversely, less than one-third of the public supports increased military spending.

The American public has been increasingly frustrated with the so-called bipartisan interventionist consensus. Polls show that Americans believe that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were a mistake, and they want to avoid similar quagmires. Although panic about a high-profile terrorist incident can generate temporary support for US military action in the Middle East, that support tends to fade, and it is always notable for a lack of enthusiasm for extended occupations or nation-building missions.

The GOP and Democratic elites are also out of touch with the American public on the issue of alliances. Trump was able to tap into a reservoir of anger about the allies not bearing their “fair share” of the collective defense burden. In fact, the public shows manifest reluctance to defend allies like Taiwan and South Korea, even though Washington has a long-standing commitment. A willingness to shed American blood for the likes of NATO allies such as the Baltic republics is far from certain either.

Johnson and Weld have been far less definitive than previous LP tickets in repudiating interventionism. For example, they would not necessarily have the United States withdraw immediately from NATO. They would, however, push for lower military spending, rather than higher, and the days of the US military being the first responder to every crisis in the world would not be part of their foreign policy. For a war-weary American public, that is an appealing message.

Finally, support for the LP may compel the Republicans and Democrats to address economic (especially budgetary) policies in a more serious fashion. Both major parties talk about reducing the alarming, chronic annual federal budget deficit, but their actions belie their words. The administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama added more to the US national debt than all previous presidents combined. And one is hard-pressed to figure out how to stem the tide of red ink when candidates promise to give the Pentagon more to spend or want to provide free tuition for anyone who wishes to go to college. The LP points out the blatant contradictions in the positions of the GOP and its Democratic competitor and, as on the issue of war, a worried public may be ready to listen.

It remains to be seen how much of an impact the Libertarian Party will have on the 2016 election and beyond. The Johnson-Weld upsurge could be merely a one-time phenomenon brought about by the selection of especially unsavory nominees by the two major parties. But it is also possible

that it represents the cutting edge of a new political coalition - a new moderate force more in tune with the wishes of the American people.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of ten books on international affairs. His latest book (co-authored with Malou Innocent) is **Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America's Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes.***