



The case for a new holiday: Inside the first ever Freedom Day celebration

By Eric Boehm

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With apologies to Sara Lee: nobody doesn't like freedom.

But do Americans appreciate and understand their freedom enough? Frayda Levy thinks not, and wants to make sure people take time, once a year, to appreciate the uniquely American experience of it all.

Levy is a philanthropist and the organizing force behind a proposal for a new holiday: Freedom Day, a new holiday to be celebrated on April 13 each year. For the inaugural celebration, she pulled together groups from the right and left — along with a bunch of libertarians stuck somewhere in between the two — in what is perhaps one of the most hopeful ideas in the political marketplace: that it's possible to set aside parties and politics to find a common ground.

She says that common ground is a celebration of freedom. Even if that means the freedom to disagree about almost everything else.

“Freedom day is about us recognizing the freedoms that we enjoy every day, and until we recognize them, we're not able to protect them,” Levy told Watchdog.org on Monday.

That idea was put to the test Monday at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia for the first annual celebration of Freedom Day. Groups as politically diverse as Cato Institute and the Center for American Progress shared the stage for a day of discourse about the foundations, future and meaning of freedom in the United States.

There might have been disagreement on the specifics, but the guests embraced Levy's vision for a day of setting aside disputes in favor of finding common ground.

“There's room for many of us in the sandbox,” said Anthony Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union.

“We'd like to use our First Amendment rights, as individuals and as a corporation, to have a discussion about these issues across the aisle,” said Mark Holden, a senior vice president with

Koch Industries, which funds the conservative and libertarian groups that also attended the event Monday.

Some might say freedom already has a day: The Fourth of July.

But that day is about so many other things — powerful words set down on parchment more than 200 years ago, the bloody struggles for the nation’s founding and survival, and of course fireworks and baseball and barbecues. In many ways, the Fourth is a look back at where we’ve come from. Freedom plays a role in that story, for sure, but it is part of an ensemble cast.

The idea behind Freedom Day is to look at freedom in the present day, to celebrate the way in which freedom makes our lives better in the 21st century, Levy says.

That requires some looking back, of course. The constitution was central to all the issues debated Monday, ranging from marriage equality to National Security Agency surveillance and from economic liberty to health care laws.

But Freedom Day is not just about the big picture stuff.

Levy, a self-described libertarian from New Jersey, says it’s really about the small stuff, too. Like how people dress.

Spend a day walking around any American city and you’ll see men wearing yamakas, women in hijab and youngsters with pants sagging on the ground or tattoos that you know they’ll one day regret.

People might make decisions you disagree with, or wear things you think are silly, but even something as simple as the freedom to dress as you want is something that shouldn’t be taken for granted, Levy says.

“Our reaction should be ‘wow, I’m glad I live in a country where people can do that,’” Levy says. “The bigger picture is ‘live and let live.’”

For the first Freedom Day celebration, the location was obvious.

Monday’s lineup of speeches and panel discussions brought together experts from across the political spectrum at Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center, practically a stone’s throw from Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were drawn up.

By next year, she hopes to expand the celebration to multiple cities. It’s not going to be about the high-minded ideas of the think tank crowd — at least not exclusively — and can be something as simple as a parade where everyone is encouraged to dress in crazy costumes, Levy says.

She hopes Freedom Day will grow into something that mirrors not the Fourth of July, but rather Earth Day.

When Earth Day was devised by environmental activists of the 1970s, it was initially a niche celebration for those already invested in the movement. Now, several decades later, it's not just a part of the environmental movement but largely a gateway into it via school curriculum and social activities.

Like the planet we live on, everyone is somewhat aware of the important of freedom, but that doesn't mean everyone agrees on what is best for it to thrive.

That was certainly apparently in the debates over religious freedom that dominated the three panel discussions Monday afternoon.

From the Hobby Lobby challenge against Obamacare to the recently approved religious freedom laws in Indiana and elsewhere that some have called a "license to discriminate" against gay and lesbian couples, states have become battlegrounds where the definition of freedom isn't always clear.

Can a state government protect religious freedom at the cost of potentially allowing private businesses to discriminate against potential customers? Can a private company use a claim of religious freedom to block services to certain groups?

Another panel examined the relationship between the freedom of speech and rules for the political process, including the highly partisan views on the Citizens United case in which the U.S. Supreme Court removed many limits on campaign fundraising because it viewed them as infringing on free speech.

They are all difficult questions, with different answers depending on your point of view. At the most basic, progressives and liberals tend to see freedom as something that best flourishes when the state acts to prevent individuals from being oppressed by more powerful, privileged groups. Conservatives see freedom as being best protected when the state stays out of the way and lets individuals do as they choose.

Freedom doesn't mean agreement, and it never will. But it should mean that people can debate with civility and respect for those who hold a different point of view.

"It is a terrible shame when issues this important get sucked into the vortex of the culture war," said Michael Gerson, a columnist for the Washington Post who tried to find the middle ground on one of the more argumentative panels on the day's schedule. "Democracy is designed for disagreement, but it is undermined by mutual contempt."

There was more common ground to be found in other areas, most notably in the realm of criminal justice reform, an issue that is increasingly uniting the left and right (and the libertarians too).

Unraveling years of poor decision-making that has caused America to have the highest incarceration rate in the world won't be easy or quick, but at least it has broad appeal.

“We're thrilled to be working with Koch Industries on criminal justice reform,” said Romero, from the ALCU.

Good luck finding that sort of political sweet spot in too many other places these days. Maybe Levy is onto something here.