

## Pragmatically Toward Libertarianism The Daily Dish

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by *Conor Friedersdorf*

In concurrence with the creed of *The Atlantic*, I consider myself to be "of no party or clique," and the best insight I can offer into my work is its premise: that a writer's job is to strive for the truth, and to remember that he'll sometimes be wrong. As a result, I am reticent to characterize myself politically on occasions when I'm really being asked, "Whose side are you on?" The answer to that question should never be "the liberal side" or "the conservative side," unless the person being questioned is naive enough to think that one ideology or the other has a monopoly on truth.

A question I don't mind is "Which tradition of political philosophy do you find most useful or persuasive?" In shorthand, my answer is that I'm both a conservative and a libertarian, or some combination. A longer answer is that I embrace aspects of classical liberalism too, and if you find yourself thinking that these terms mean very different things to different people, I agree. That's why I try to be introduced on radio spots as "a California based writer" rather than "a conservative" or "a libertarian," but anyone who attempts it knows these labels are impossible to escape. I sometimes even slip lazily into their use in spite of myself, though I'd banish them tomorrow if I could.

Today is another matter, because I cannot express this thought otherwise: I now think of myself as a libertarian more than a conservative when I reflect on how my ideological beliefs map onto the political coalitions whose success I desire.

This isn't one of those overwrought, more-in-sadness-than-anger essays that true believers write to announce an ideological conversion. The respect I have for conservative insights remains intact, as does my belief that Edmund Burke and friends remain important guides in our pursuit of prudent governance.

I also retain the reservations I've long had about describing myself as a libertarian and leaving it at that. Bruce Bartlett says that he is "basically libertarian but tempered by Burkean small-c conservatism." It's a characterization I find appealing. Were I able to banish government's role in marriage entirely, I'd refrain, though I do want gays to be able to marry, largely for the conservative reasons so eloquently expressed by Andrew Sullivan. I favor legalizing drugs, but slowly, and with lots of attention paid to how my expectations track the real world results of that policy. I regard the family unit as petty damned important to a functioning society. Existing institutions matter.

These are but four incompletely articulated examples, but I trust you get the idea: I identify partly as a libertarian, but my failure to automatically support the whole libertarian line as a matter of first principles would cause some who go by that label to kick me out of [the free state](#) (an improbable project whose success I'd cheer).

It is precisely this grounding in pragmatism and real world consequences that is pushing me toward libertarianism generally, and especially the brand you find at the Cato Institute and *Reason* (not that there is anything like consensus within those institutions, which helps explain their increasing attractiveness). It may sound strange to advocate for libertarianism as a practical matter, when conservatives and liberals dominate the political landscape, and it's a struggle to elect even a single libertarian (not that any competitive candidate would call themselves that) to the Senate.

Let me clarify.

The pragmatist in me has concluded, after long experience and repeated disappointments, that the conservative movement is never actually going to deliver on its promise to check the growth of the federal government, however superior its rhetoric might be on that issue; and that the progressive movement is never going to deliver on its promise to protect civil liberties, however superior its rhetoric might be on that issue.

Instead, the conservative movement is going to continue advocating for an unsustainable foreign policy and a vision of executive power that is utterly at odds with the checks, balances, and purposeful limits on presidential prerogatives enacted by the founding generation. And progressives who manage to elect their dream president, plus a majority in both houses of Congress? They won't reverse the trend, so much as ignore it -- the better to pass agenda items like a health care bill that thankfully covers more Americans, but leaves unaddressed many of the worst pathologies of the status quo and acts as a stark giveaway to influential industry players.

There is our fiscal insolvency too. Is anyone serious about addressing that?

I retain Burkean concerns with pure libertarianism, but the pragmatist in me is confident that they're irrelevant. In a way, that is a disappointment. Libertarians lack the power to pass their most appealing agenda items, never mind the extreme stuff. That aside, there is also the fact that the conservative movement's worst features -- its advocacy for foreign wars of choice, catastrophically failed approach to drug prohibition, and radical views on executive power -- are themselves Burkean nightmares. And speaking of that trifecta, President Obama and our Democratic Congress are by now complicit in every one of them.

I'll probably go on voting for Republicans and Democrats, barring a competitive libertarian alternative: Gary Johnson before Barack Obama before Sarah Palin, always choosing the least bad option. I'll definitely celebrate the good work being done by places like the ACLU, the Institute for Justice, the NRA, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, The Claremont Institute's Center for Local Government, and other strange bedfellows. And I'll stay agnostic about the political strategy libertarians should pursue. Build a party? Make alliances of convenience? Reach out to liberals as Brink Lindsey is doing? Hell if I know. For my part, I'll just keep writing what I think is true, whether its short term effect is to hurt or help the political coalition whose greater success I desire.

All the better if this post helps some readers toward what I regard as the most important takeaway: upon reflection, the loose coalition of

libertarianism looks pretty damned attractive to pragmatic folks on the right with Burkean sympathies.

(Should anyone respond at length to this item, email me at [conor.friedersdorf@gmail.com](mailto:conor.friedersdorf@gmail.com), or ping me via [@conor64](https://twitter.com/conor64) on Twitter.)