

## **What Makes Libertarians Run?**

### **The fallout from Robert Sarvis's 6% showing in Virginia got me thinking (and ranting) about why Libertarians run in elections they won't win**

by George J. Dance

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Let me start by making a full disclosure. I am a member of the Libertarian Party, and have been one for the past four decades. And more: I have served as chairman of one Libertarian Party, and as leader of two. So I am not a disinterested observer of the Party; indeed, its members' activities and comments, and activities and comments by others regarding it, always arouse strong emotions in me.

More disclosure: Those strong emotions provoked me into a rant one morning last week; and that rant forms the basis of the following article. Part analysis, part diatribe, it is written in a hurry, and that shows. For one thing, I have dispensed with my normal habit of footnoting everything: instead, I have tried to confine myself only to facts that everyone knows. For another, this essay is not even primarily about facts, but about opinions.

There is a fact underlying my morning rant: that of the election result in the recently-concluded governor's race for Virginia. In that nail-biter, a Democrat beat a Republican by a mere 1% of the vote, in large part because the latter had done his best to alienate women (by talking of outlawing abortion) and homosexuals (by wanting to recriminalize oral and anal sex). But that wasn't the only story: In the same election, Robert Sarvis, a little-known candidate with a campaign budget of just \$200,000, won more than 6% of the vote. Never before has any Libertarian candidate for governor of Virginia - even Bill Redpath, National Director of the Libertarian Party at the time he ran - ever received as much as 1% of the vote. Until now, 6% for a Libertarian in that state was simply inconceivable.

This is not the only 'personal best' that Libertarians have achieved recently. Last year, for instance, Gary Johnson received more than a million votes: the first time, in the Libertarian Party's 40-year existence, that its presidential candidate has passed that benchmark. While that was still a small fraction of the vote (less than 1%), other Libertarians - such as Dan Cox, senatorial candidate in Montana - scored, like Sarvis, in the high single digits.

Those signs of progress have done wonders for Libertarians' morale; but in other quarters, they have led to attacks on the Libertarian Party, and even to advice/demands for it to disband. Sarvis's best-ever showing has begun to prompt similar reactions.

It was in that context that I read a comment a few days after the election by Dave Nalle, the former chairman of the Republican Liberty Caucus (RLC). Nalle is a great guy, who like his caucus toils heroically to advance a liberty agenda in his party. He thinks logically, argues reasonably, never resorts to invective, and is invariably polite and well-mannered, all of which are reasons why he and I are Facebook friends. My only reason for singling him out is that it was [this comment](#) of his that I read, and that set me off, that morning:

The debacle in Virginia and all the back and forth about it reminds me that Libertarian vanity candidates are not just the product of the ego and vanity of the candidate himself, but also the egotism and self-delusion of his supporters.

To be sure, the RLC has reasons to put down the LP: they are, after all, competitors for the same vote. Even allowing for that factor, though, the above comment struck me as a particularly wrong-headed analysis of the Virginia election and its aftermath.

First, I cannot see the the Virginia results as a "debacle". Sure, the Republicans lost control of the governor's mansion; but they maintained a solid grip on the state legislature. A Democratic executive and Republican legislature, as we saw in Bill Clinton's second term, is the best possible combination for restraining the growth of government - until the day that Libertarians start being elected, the very best result that they could hope for.

Second, I haven't seen much "back and forth". What I have read are several Republican complaints that two PACs gave money to Sarvis. While both PACs are run by solid libertarians (current LP National Director Wes Benedict and Cato Institute founder Ed Crane), FOX News has discovered that known Democrats have contributed to both! To which Libertarians can and should reply: So what? Republicans are using state legislatures to keep Libertarians off the ballot around the United States; just what is wrong with Libertarians using money, voluntarily contributed for that purpose, from Democrats to get back on again?

Third: Libertarians do not run out of "vanity". Running for the Libertarian Party does nothing for one's resume, one's popularity, or even (after the usual humbling defeat) one's ego. OTC, it imposes large personal costs, in terms of money, time, and stress. Election fatigue is probably the main factor in Libertarian activists burning out. .

So why do Libertarians run at all? From my experience, simply because, if they don't run, libertarians and libertarian issues will be ignored.

In the last election, for example, did anyone besides Libertarian Gary Johnson, talk about balancing the budget (ie, stopping the state's constant theft from our children)? If either Romney or Obama said anything, I missed it. Even in the rare case where Republicans and Democrats do talk about balancing the budget, they mislead the voters about how that can be done: Republicans say they can balance the budget by cutting taxes, and Democrats say they can do it by increasing government spending.

The situation is the same with respect to civil liberties. For more than 30 years, Libertarians were the only party calling for equal treatment under the law for gay couples. While the Democrats, and even some Republicans, have belatedly jumped on that bandwagon, other flagrant violations of liberty go unremarked by either party. One example: In America, it is normal to find governments fining citizens, imprisoning them, and even invading their homes and shooting them, just for smoking plants! If the Libertarians did not run, who would ever call that the absurdity it is?

Fourth: Libertarians are under no delusions that they will win tomorrow (or even in a decade). But they do know that today they can run, speak up, and even do well; better than ever, in Gary Johnson's case (and in Robert Sarvis's).

The effects of that are incalculable. For instance, Ed Clark's 5% of the vote in California in 1978, and his appearance on the ballot on all 50 states in 1980, may have been the biggest single factor persuading the GOP to nominate \*and support\* a liberty-leaning candidate for President that year. Similarly, Sarvis' 6% in Virginia, and possibly similar totals in other states, may very well result in the GOP finally nominating another such candidate in 2016. If Republicans want to neutralize Libertarians in elections, they will have to nominate libertarian candidates; and some of those *will* win.

Nalle is aware of all that; he uses the same arguments to pressing the GOP establishment to accept libertarian issues and candidates. But he fails to see that his group's 'pressure from within' means nothing, unless it is balanced by a similar 'pressure from without' imposed by the potential of a Libertarian Party to appeal to erstwhile Republican voters.

It is no different in regard to Democrats and their issues. Getting the Democratic Party establishment to rein in the National Security Agency, not to mention the entire Homeland Security Leviathan, will require both constant 'pressure from within' by Democratic party members of the Kucinich type, and 'pressure from without' by the Libertarians and/or other third parties.

None of which is meant to disparage libertarians who choose to join and try to influence a major, or even another minor, party. Libertarians control their own lives, and each does what he or she thinks best. However, all such efforts could come to naught, absent a party that consistently champions the ideas of individual liberty. If not us, who? If not now, when?