



## **The GOP's libertarian time bomb: Why "going Rand" would be an electoral disaster**

**The conventional wisdom is that a libertarian shift would revitalize Republicans — but that's dead wrong**

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The time has come again for a perennial theme in politics: the idea that Republicans should “go libertarian.” The questionable premise, forwarded most recently by Robert Draper and Emily Ekins, is that the Republican Party could sweep up millennials, who are “socially liberal” and “economically conservative,” by adopting a more libertarian message. The ascent of popular startups like Uber and Airbnb — which have about them a decidedly libertarian flavor — has only strengthened this supposedly conventional wisdom.

Here's the thing, though. The data show that this is an unlikely possibility, but more problematically, doing so would actually decimate the Republican base. The truth is, libertarianism is antithetical to conservatism.

The Republican base, broadly speaking, is made up of five often-overlapping coalitions: business conservatives who seek low taxes and low regulation; foreign policy hawks who seek a strong defense budget; social conservatives who fear moral anarchy; racists and nativists worried about immigration and affirmative action; and elderly retirees who rely on Social Security and Medicare. This coalition is already difficult enough to maintain, but in the future it will become more difficult.

And a “libertarian” message would only further erode the base.

Business conservatives seem like they would be the most open to a libertarian message. After all, lower taxes and less regulation are amenable to both groups. But Republicans are already very pro-business and anti-regulation; to go further in order to pull in a few more libertarians would entail (1) decreased fiscal or monetary intervention, or (2) the elimination of corporate subsidies. Both of these moves would alienate business conservatives, who, after all, rely significantly on government support (to the tune of \$92 billion in 2006) and accept the need for countercyclical spending policies. Libertarians might struggle to support Republicans doling out farm subsidies year after year, subsidizing exports and bailing out big businesses and banks, but business conservatives demand it.

Foreign policy hawks would also find many of the core tenets of libertarianism — skepticism of foreign interventionism, opposition to the NSA and a healthy loathing of the military-industrial complex — to be problematic. Republicans could try to peel off support among libertarians by opposing torture, closing Guantanamo and investigating the NSA, but it's tough to believe that the party of Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld would be able to garner much trust. The swift turn of Rand Paul from libertarian anti-interventionist to foreign policy hawk attests to the difficulty in going this route.

Social conservatives would likely be the most difficult challenge to libertarians. Libertarians tend to support individual liberty: the right to gamble, drink, smoke, watch pornography, take one's own life, participate in any form of sexual activity and use drugs. Needless to say, these views would be incredibly problematic for the moral majority coalition, which still forms an incredibly important part of the Republican base. It was Hayek who wrote in "Why I'm Not A Conservative": "The conservative does not object to coercion or arbitrary power so long as it is used for what he regards as the right purposes... like the socialist he regards himself as entitled to force the values he holds onto other people."

While it's often considered impolite to note in public, a rather significant base of Republican power is still nativism. Witness the hysterical response to Central American refugees, the baseless claims against Obama's citizenship, and the opposition to any immigration reform that doesn't include a moat full of crocodiles across the border. But most libertarians are strongly supportive of open borders. Libertarian economist Bryan Caplan calls it, "The Efficient, Egalitarian, Libertarian, Utilitarian Way to Double World GDP." In a world when even the "reasonable" Republicans are still spouting xenophobic drivel, witness Ross Douthat's column worrying that "the bills under discussion almost always offer some form of legal status before enforcement takes effect, which promises a replay of the Reagan-era amnesty's failure to ever deliver the limits on future immigration that it promised."

Finally, there are the elderly retirees, whose support Republicans maintain by making sure that any spending cuts fall on the backs of the poor — not the old. One wonders how they would receive the Cato Institute plan to turn Social Security into private savings accounts subject to market forces. Many would balk if a politician called Social Security "federally mandated generational theft," but this is how Nick Gillespie regards it. Social Security and Medicare are sacrosanct and any attempt to reform them is likely a "third rail" that would lead to electoral death for the politician that tried.

The problem with libertarianism is mainly that few people agree with its ideological assumptions — but will often come to the same political answer. But this means that most people will be "libertarian" on some issues, rather than use a libertarian mode of thinking to get there. So people may be programmatically libertarian, but ideologically disagree with fundamental assumptions. As political scientist Seth Maskett writes, "Basically everyone agrees with libertarians on *something*, but they tend to get freaked out just as quickly by the ideology's other stances."

These contradictions are obvious, and Draper's widely discussed piece touches on some of them. For instance, there is Mollie Hemingway, who claims to be a libertarian, but is anti-choice and

rejects gay marriage. She argued that although “‘people should be free to organize their own lifestyle,’ the state had a unique interest in protecting heterosexual marriage, because it was ‘the relationship that’s ordered to producing children.’” She might want to turn to Ayn Rand, who argued that, “but it is improper for the law to interfere with a relationship between consenting adults” and noted that “abortion is a moral right — which should be left to the sole discretion of the woman involved; morally, nothing other than her wish in the matter is to be considered. Who can conceivably have the right to dictate to her what disposition she is to make of the functions of her own body?”

Or what of Murray Rothbard’s claim that “the parent should not have a *legal obligation* to feed, clothe, or educate his children, since such obligations would entail positive acts coerced upon the parent and depriving the parent of his rights. The parent therefore may not murder or mutilate his child, and the law properly outlaws a parent from doing so. But the parent should have the legal right *not* to feed the child, i.e., to allow it to die.” Hemingway is a programmatic libertarian — she likes some proposals, but rejects the radical individualism libertarianism truly entails.

And those are on the issues where Republicans are supposed to agree with Libertarians. Nick Gillespie touches on the minor contradictions in an interview for Draper’s piece:

Republicans always saw libertarians as nice to have around in case they wanted to score some weed, and we always knew where there was a party. And for a while it made sense to bunk up with them. But after a while, it would be like, ‘So if we agree on limited government, how about opening the borders?’ No, that’s crazy. ‘How about legalizing drugs? How about giving gays equal rights?’ No, come on, be serious. And so I thought, There’s nothing in this for me.

He leaves some equally problematic things out: legalized prostitution, restrained foreign policy, massive defense cuts, abolishing social security and Austrian economics. None of these will curry favor with the Republican establishment. The question is not whether there are a large number of Americans who would be excited by libertarianism; the question is whether the Republicans could maintain their current coalition and also court these voters — this seems unlikely.

Then there’s the fact that Rand Paul, once an ardent libertarian, has had to step back on numerous positions. There’s the fact that Gary Johnson alienated the base and Ron Paul looked loony in 2012, opposing the Iraq War, calling for an end to the federal reserve and arguing that the government should legalize all drugs. Ronald Reagan, who successfully used libertarian rhetoric (see: *A Time for Choosing*) eschewed it when governing. The Republican Party has long used libertarian rhetoric while pursuing statist policies. The Mercatus Center, a libertarian think tank, ranks the 50 states based on “freedom,” but weights “tax burden” as 28.6% of the metric and “freedom from tort abuse” as 11.5%, while “civil liberties” only account for 0.6% of a state’s score and “education policy” 1.9%. In Mercatus-land, alcohol, gun and cigarette freedom rank above marriage freedom, and abortion goes unmentioned. A libertarian turn for conservatives would be nice — libertarians actually hold the free market views conservatives claim and actually accept the importance of reason and individual liberty. But this is the reason it will never happen: True libertarianism would decimate the Republican base, so instead a half-

hearted libertarianism prevails — stripped of policies, it subsists on empty rhetoric. But then again, the last few Republican rebranding efforts have been empty rhetoric, and so will this one.