

# THE DAILY CALLER

## The Libertarian Party Reduces Liberty

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October 15, 2018

Milton Friedman's favor for Republican over Democrat was reasonable then and is more so today.

Thanks to Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson in New Mexico, the Democratic candidate for Senate is poised to win with some 40 percent of the vote. In Indiana, the LP candidate for Senate has polled as high as eight percent. In Missouri, incumbent Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill is up for reelection, and Matt Welch, an LP supporter and Reason magazine editor, reports: "New Poll Shows Inclusion of Libertarian Candidate Helpful to Claire McCaskill in Toss-up Missouri." That the LP will matter in at least some races is likely, conceivably even to the balance in the House.

Libertarians pride themselves on facing up to hard realities — scarcity, human selfishness, human ignorance and folly. Don't romanticize government.

Another reality is that America has a two-party system. Libertarians need to face up to that. If we had a different system of voting, such as instant runoff voting, I, too, might support the LP. But we don't have a different system of voting.

Libertarians pride themselves on understanding that political action has unintended consequences. The unintended consequence of the LP is to reduce liberty, I believe.

In a two-party system, third parties are damaging to their own cause. The LP helps the Democrat Party as the Green Party helps the Republican Party. In 2000, had it not been for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, Al Gore would have won. And it is likely that Ross Perot put Bill Clinton into the White House.

Milton Friedman, who passed away in 2006, stated, "I always say I am Republican with a capital 'R' and libertarian with a small 'l'."

Friedman's libertarianism would be questioned only by libertarians of the narrowest, most rationalistic sort. The responsible question is: How do the two parties stand in relation to each other? Life is full of compromising choices — it consists of little else. Classical liberals and pragmatic libertarians true to Adam Smith face up to that.

In his time, Friedman felt that Republicans, by and large, were less unfavorable to classical liberal values than Democrats. I'd say he was right. That assessment has generally been sound at least back to America's most famous third-party candidate: In 1912, the disappointed and selfish Theodore Roosevelt jumped in as Progressive. Then the country enjoyed eight years of Woodrow Wilson, who prevailed in 1912 with 41.8 percent of the vote.

Milton Friedman said he was a Republican with a capital 'R' because, in his time, Republicans were quite consistently less bad than Democrats on most economic and regulatory issues, welfare-state issues, and nanny-state issues. Less bad. Wisdom is the art of discerning the less bad.

In 1980, at age 18, I voted for the LP candidate for president. Introspectively, I know the urge to put down competitors: "Pox on both your houses. Listen to we libertarians."

Self-interest moves all of us, and self-interest evolves. I am now 56 years old. I have come to feel that we libertarians have tended to put our finger on the scale. Convenient: If the two parties were equally bad, then there would be little mischief in "pox on both your houses".

We'd argue Republicans were worse than Democrats on enough issues — lifestyle choice, foreign policy and the military, immigration, privacy — so as to condemn them equally, or even to favor the Democrats.

However sound back then, things have changed. Republicans are certainly more "hip" now on drug prohibition, gay rights and other personal lifestyle issues. Abortion is complicated, but it is far-fetched to imagine significant setbacks in women's reproductive autonomy.

Nowadays, if a libertarian has to make the case against Republicans (vis-a-vis Democrats), the chief grounds will be foreign policy and the military, immigration, and international trade policy.

On trade, the Trump administration clearly reduces a libertarian advantage that Republicans have traditionally enjoyed over Democrats. President Trump poorly appreciates free trade, it seems, and the influence of Peter Navarro and Wilbur Ross is unfortunate, while that of Larry Kudlow is fortunate. It is unclear, however, that President Trump has a protectionist long-run vision.

His rhetoric and policy is often bad, but perhaps that is part of exerting strategic pressure and of making future threats credible. I reckon that Republicans' own movement has been retrograde, reducing their now smaller advantage on the issue of trade policy.

As for foreign policy and immigration, on both fronts, I have grown more agnostic with regard to what conduces to overall liberty in the long-run. On foreign policy, it seems that Republicans are now wiser to the folly of heroic intervention and nation-building. Although Republicans clearly want to spend more on the military, I don't see libertarian grounds otherwise for marking them down relative to the Democrats, on foreign policy.

The areas of trade, foreign, and immigration policy matter only at the federal level. At state and local levels, none work against Republicans.

As for the Democrats, I think they've really gotten worse in recent decades, and especially in recent years. There are, no doubt, still some issues where Democrats rate better than Republicans from a libertarian viewpoint. But I now feel that overall the advantage goes to the Republicans, hands-down.

Libertarians may argue that the LP works to make the two major parties more libertarian, by making them compete on the margin for voters who lean libertarian. But such voters always have the option of not voting at all, so the major parties would have to appeal to them regardless of an LP.

I don't see the LP as significant to the diffusion of libertarian thought and sentiment; in fact, the LP has sometimes been counterproductive. As for the idea of eventually growing the LP to be a real contender, well, the more votes it gets, the more surely will it aid the less libertarian party. Libertarian "tipping-point" visions pander to millenarian folly. The logic of the two-party system is what it is.

Libertarians who want to advance liberty by being active in party politics ought to work within the two parties: I applaud libertarians who improve either. We need better Democrats and better Republicans. And, of course, in a particular race, the libertarian advantage might go to the Democrat.

Just recently, the Cato Institute put out a report on the Governors, and the Mercatus Center put out a report on the fiscal affairs of the states. You can guess the results.

But, frankly, recent events have reinforced in me a deeper feeling that the Democrat Party is a left-wing party in an illiberal sense that spans generations and continents. The concern goes beyond sizing up positions on the issues; it reaches to broader norms of honest government, civility, and fair play, norms upon which liberty depends.

I feel surer than ever before that the Libertarian Party reduces liberty.