



The current libertarian moment

Will Rahn

November 9, 2017

If you turn your mind back to the heady days around the 2014 midterms you might vaguely recall something called the "libertarian moment." An invention of pundits, the term encapsulated the notion that libertarians, long a rebellious junior partner in Republican politics, were offering the best way forward for the GOP.

As a concept, it almost made sense. Rand Paul, relieved of his father's considerable baggage, looked like an attractive national candidate. Paul Ryan, long a favorite of the Koch Brothers and the Cato Institute, was ascendant in Congress, where even rogue backbenchers like Justin Amash had their groupies.

Most importantly, libertarians seemed to offer a version of Republicanism that was untainted by George W. Bush's many failures. They were anti-war, cosmopolitan in outlook, and hip by the low standards of the right.

So they were of course going nowhere. In 2016, Paul's presidential campaign floundered as his father's voters gravitated toward Donald Trump, who ran on a distinctly unlibertarian message of less trade, less immigration, more cops, and more government. Ryan became Speaker in 2015, which meant he had to do the bidding of a party wherein his ideological comrades were and are a minority. The GOP was being recreated in Trump's statist image, a process that still continues.

Here's the thing, though: The first year of Trump's presidency is the closest we'll probably ever get to a real libertarian moment. So libertarians better enjoy it, because this is probably as good as it will get for them.

While in office, Trump hasn't done anything, aside from some regulatory relief and a travel ban currently surviving by the skin of its teeth in the courts. Congress hasn't been able to pass any major legislation, and there's a good chance even tax reform will fail.

On the other hand, an ineffective Congress isn't the worst thing by libertarian standards. Yes, they haven't repealed Obamacare or Dodd-Frank, and they may not even be able to lower taxes all that much. But they're not passing new regulations. They're not raising taxes. The pre-Trump status quo, while deeply imperfect, is being more or less in place. And it can be said with some confidence that Ryan, who gobbled up Ayn Rand novels in his youth, maintains an essentially libertarian outlook despite the compromises he feels forced to make.

From a libertarian standpoint, things might be better in the executive branch, which remains understaffed and overburdened. The government is already smaller in the sense that it has fewer

people running around than it did during the Obama years, and it's hard to regulate if you're not hiring regulators. No wonder the stock market, which initially fell when news broke that Trump had been elected, keeps soaring to new heights.

With a few notable exceptions, Trump has also been appointing a raft of libertarian-leaning jurists to the bench, including Neil Gorsuch. Libertarians can and do complain about much of the cabinet, particularly Jeff Sessions, but even the Justice Department could fall into worse hands.

In fact, it probably will, and in the near future. Trump's government is not the night-watchman state many libertarians would prefer. But it is incompetent enough to not get much of anything done, which might be the next best thing. Call it the drunk-watchman state.

But at some point the bill for all this will come due, and we saw a preview of this Tuesday night. The country is lurching leftward, and when the Democrats inevitably return to power they're unlikely to be as market-friendly as the Clintons.

Take health care, which was the number one issue for voters in Virginia on Tuesday and helped power Ralph Northam's landslide. Just a few years ago, this was a winning issue for Republicans. Now they're getting killed on it, and single-payer is becoming a fixture of the Democratic catechism.

Socialism is suddenly in vogue, particularly among young voters. Centrist Democrats like Andrew Cuomo are doing their best to ape Bernie Sanders.

Even Republicans, as Trump's primary victory illustrated, are coming around to the idea that the era of small government is over. It turns out the GOP faithful actually kind of like the welfare state, particularly when it's helping people like them.

Meanwhile, the kind of disaffected young person who used to become a libertarian now seems increasingly drawn to the alt-right, which is lousy with former Ron Paul acolytes like Richard Spencer.

The economist Murray Rothbard may have been on to something when he argued that the only way forward for libertarianism is right-wing populism. The observation cost Rothbard his reputation among many of his admirers, and for good reason, because it was coupled with an embrace of white nationalism. But he was right in the sense that libertarianism was never going to have a broad constituency in this country, while someone like Trump inevitably would.

This is not the libertarian moment most serious libertarians would prefer. They are not getting the drug legalization, open borders, unimpeded markets, or the dismantling of the administrative and welfare states they have wanted.

But they should try and enjoy this moment while it lasts, because from their perspective, things will likely get much worse. It's always darkest before it's completely black.