

Libertarian populism and the battle for the Perot vote

By: Greg Dworkin -August 4, 2013

All last week, it's been Chris Christie versus Rand Paul for all the marbles in 2016. But this public feud is really a surrogate for another argument within and between the GOP: How can Republicans get more of the working class white (WCW) vote? 1992 Perot voters fall in this category (though Perot voters were certainly not all white) and have been assiduously sought by Republicans ever since 1992.

One way to court Perot voters as well as WCW voters is the approach dubbed "Libertarian populism." I'll make the case, however, that there's more that divides than unites in that approach, which is a big reason why Christie and Paul are feuding.

Let me give you a brief reading list to bring you up to speed. As one of its advocates, let's start with Tim Carney:

What is Libertarian Populism?

After multi-millionaire financier Mitt Romney badly lost the presidential election while writing off the 47 percent of the population that pays only Social Security tax, Medicare tax, sales tax, probably state income tax, and maybe property tax, a few of us on the right started saying more loudly what we've been saying for years: Conservatives need to turn to the working class as the swing population that can deliver elections.

Offer populist policies that mesh with free-market principles, and don't be afraid to admit that the game is rigged in favor of the wealthy and the well-connected.

Now, Carney, like many others, points to Sean Trende. In looking at WCW voters, Trende was reviewing one of the theoretical paths to future GOP victory, not suggesting that this was the only path or the path that must be followed in lieu of reaching out to non-whites. It's not even his preferred path—he favors a Gang of Eight style compromise (despite how others might characterize his work). But Trende also was one the earliest analysts to discuss Perot voters in the context of 2012 and 2016, something we'll circle back to.

While Carney puts Libertarian populism in the best possible light, others are not so kind. See some examples below the fold.

Mike Konczal:

The specifics of a libertarian populist agenda are often lacking, but advocates sometimes point to things like Rand Paul's budget plan. This is a plan that calls for flat taxes, cutting discretionary spending through a balanced budget and removing the Federal Reserve's dual mandate to promote low inflation and high employment.

This brings to mind Eugene Mirman's joke about bears, where he notes that the common notion that you should play dead if you see a bear "is a rumor that bears spread." Similarly, the idea that reducing the tax burden on the rich while calling for tighter money and deregulation counts as "populism" sure seems like a rumor spread by the 1 percent.

As Ross Douthat notes, this is an approach that deserves to lose given the economic realities facing the working class. From the voter's perspective, one immediate problem is that libertarian populism looks less like a genuinely new agenda and more like a fresh marketing spin on the GOP's current platform favoring "job creators."

Paul Krugman:

And while many nonwhite Americans depend on these safety-net programs, so do many less-well-off whites—the very voters Libertarian populism is supposed to reach.

Specifically, more than 60 percent of those benefiting from unemployment insurance are white. Slightly less than half of food stamp beneficiaries are white, but in swing states the proportion is much higher. For example, in Ohio, 65 percent of households receiving food stamps are white. Nationally, 42 percent of Medicaid recipients are non-Hispanic whites, but, in Ohio, the number is 61 percent.

So when Republicans engineer sharp cuts in unemployment benefits, block the expansion of Medicaid and seek deep cuts in food stamp funding — all of which they have, in fact, done — they may be disproportionately hurting Those People; but they are also inflicting a lot of harm on the struggling Northern white families they are supposedly going to mobilize.

Which brings us back to why libertarian populism is, as I said, bunk. You could, I suppose, argue that destroying the safety net is a libertarian act — maybe freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. But populist it isn't.

Jonathan Chait:

In the face of this, a populist Republican faces two options. One is to attempt to meld the populist impulse with economic libertarianism, by devising an agenda that shrinks government exclusively in ways that do not increase inequality. You can see this in Carney's heroic efforts to craft an agenda out of such items as abolishing the Export-Import Bank, eliminating the ethanol mandate, and reducing the payroll tax. I don't mean to ridicule — there are real things to do here. But you could eliminate every business subsidy in Washington, and you'd

still have in place a massive income gulf and a wealthy elite able to pass its advantages on to the next generation (through proximity to jobs, social connections, acculturation, spending money on education) that have nothing to do with government. The egalitarian laissez-faire economy is a fantasy.

Some Republican populists don't shrink from this reality. By their way of thinking, market outcomes are inherently just. "Unfairness" is something the government creates by definition. This is what writers like Domenech ("the cause of limited government as a means not only to safeguarding liberty, but to unwinding webs of privilege and rent-seeking") or Levin ("Capitalism is fundamentally democratic") are getting at. But this is not a new idea at all, merely a new label for an old conservative tradition of attacking welfare queens or New Deal goldbrickers.

Josh Barro:

But what is perhaps most amazing about libertarian populists is how they believe their own rhetoric. To them, the federal government is an entity that taxes the poor to enrich the connected and powerful. Therefore, any effort to shrink the federal government is putting the people ahead of the powerful.

And there are lots of federal programs that are about enriching the elite. But excluding the Department of Defense, the really expensive programs are either mostly about providing benefits to the poor (Medicaid, SNAP, SSI, disability insurance) or the middle class (Social Security old-age pensions, Medicare)....

But if you think devolving programs like Social Security is a good idea, you're never going to sell your economic agenda to the center of America's middle class.

*This libertarian populism probably won't work for the GOP. Hey, we're a party of the working class, let's kick some people off food stamps
— @UnstableIsotope*

The *Economist* gives us another insight, too often ignored:

Yet I don't think this gets to the core of the problem with libertarian populism. I see two problems. First, right-wing populism in America has always amounted to white identity politics, which is why the only notable libertarian-leaning politicians to generate real excitement among conservative voters have risen to prominence through alliances with racist and nativist movements. Ron Paul's racist newsletters were not incidental to his later success, and it comes as little surprise that a man styling himself a "Southern Avenger" numbers among Rand Paul's top aides. This is what actually-existing right-wing libertarian populism looks like, and that's what it needs to look like if it is to remain popular, or right-wing. Second, political parties are coalitions of interests, and the Republican Party is the party of the rich, as well as the ideological champion of big business. A principled anti-corporatist, pro-working-class agenda stands as much chance in the GOP as a principled anti-public-sector-union stance in the Democratic Party. It simply makes no sense.

There's a reason we see Republicans resort again and again to a fusion of racially-tinged American-nationalist Christian identity politics, empty libertarian rhetoric (an integral part of traditional white American identity), and the policy interests of high-tax-bracket voters. That's what works!

This last comment gets to the heart of the matter. Populism is an anti-corporate, anti government (anti-"big", if you will) movement. To the extent that it's anti-corporate it can align with the left (see Occupy Wall Street) but to the extent it's anti-government it can align with the right (see tea party, and remember the Sarah Palin comments about "real America" in regard to white identity politics). [For more punditry and reading lists, see Abbreviated Pundit Round-up: Republicans try libertarian populism on for size].

Libertarians, meanwhile, are free traders and tend toward isolationism on foreign policy. Populists tend towards protectionism and economic nationalism. Perot voters? Their issues were economic nationalism (including decreasing reliance on imports and reducing immigration, and less foreign commitments), term limits (remember those?) and balanced budgets (even if it meant raising taxes, anathema to the current Republican party).

It's important to remember that Perot voters are not libertarians. In this Karen Tumulty piece, she references this interesting statistic:

In the 1992 election, for example, a Cato Institute analysis found that the 13 percent or so of voters who were libertarian-minded — those who told pollsters they wanted smaller government but tolerant social policies — split almost evenly among Republican incumbent George H.W. Bush, Democrat Bill Clinton and third-party candidate Ross Perot.

Two thirds of the libertarian vote went against Perot. Remembering that, it is perhaps not surprising, then, to see Paul and Christie at odds.

For that reason, we can again look at Christie versus Paul and imagine Paul as the libertarian champion. His path is a bit of a tough one since he'll have to be acceptable to social conservatives who are more puritan than libertarian. And he'll have to win over the establishment Republicans who (see his feud with John McCain) support a bigger military and a more muscular foreign policy than the isolationist Paul. But the trends are in Paul's favor:

Since 2010, there has been a 21-point jump in the percentage of Republican voters who say their greater concern is the impact of anti-terrorism policies on civil liberties (from 25% to 46%).

Does that make Christie a populist champion? Well, he could be. He certainly purports to represent the common man in his speech pattern (and plain speaking is part of populist appeal.) He might champion balanced budgets through reduced spending and a willingness to raise taxes (populists don't find taxes on the rich anathema). But would he champion the protectionist tendencies of Perot voters via economic nationalism? That's not so clear. And while his (relatively) moderate views on social issues might play well with libertarians, he, too, might run into issues with social conservatives (think how Christie will play in Iowa and South Carolina primaries). I think Christie has to do everything Rudy Giuliani didn't do: establish that he is electable, win New Hampshire and Florida and make the case he can win in November.

The libertarian side of the equation will find discomfort within a party of evangelicals and protectionists. It's hard to imagine, for example, the Reform party, Perot's third party vehicle, under the aegis of Pat Buchanan and still trying to fit it into the rubric of libertarian populism. Populist, yes (in its more dangerous form, more akin to George Wallace than Perot) but libertarian, no. If you want a modern populist in its dangerous form, think Ted Cruz.

Where would the Perot voter go in 2016? Here's one hint: Ross Perot endorsed Mitt Romney in 2012. Did you know that?

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has won an endorsement that, at one time, was among the most coveted in all of American politics.

H. Ross Perot, the Texas billionaire who launched a political movement and created his own demographic (Perot voters) in his two unsuccessful bids for the White House, has thrown his support to Romney.

It didn't make Romney a winner. But Romney wasn't exactly everyone's definition of a populist, either. What this tells us is that the Perot voter isn't going to be strictly ideologically driven, and like most voters, isn't necessarily going to be logically consistent. It's up for grabs, and whoever the winner of the demographic is, they'll have to make the most convincing case that smaller government helps ordinary people (see our reading list above to see that it's no easy task, in general because it's simply not true.)

Within the Republican Party who's winning? Hard to say for certain. For now, Christie's fav/unfav (+17) is worse than Rand Paul's (+36) among Republican registered voters (Pew) and NSA issues make Paul a hot topic. But among establishment Republicans, Christie represents continuity with the Bush era (Bush himself was a past beneficiary of Perot voters) and he certainly has access to money that Paul will have trouble matching.

Still, neither Christie nor Paul hits all the buttons and checks off all the boxes in the GOP the way Paul Ryan does. And even a Jeb Bush comes closer to acceptance on both sides of the argument without ticking off too many factions.

So, while it's too early to know how this pans out, this particular battle bears watching. What it says about the current Republican party has major implications for 2016 and beyond.

Meanwhile, if Hillary is the nominee, it may be that many of those Perot voters are still up for grabs for her as well. Don't forget their original intent:

In most states, the second choices of Perot voters only reinforced the actual outcome. For example, California, New York, Illinois and Oregon went to Clinton by large margins, and Perot voters in those states strongly preferred Clinton to Bush.

Bottom line: Perot voters since 1992 have trended Republican, but it's way too early to assume anything other than that they have a Republican lean these days which is not unbreakable, and a lot to sort out regarding which candidate fits their economic nationalism (and potential nativism) best. At the same time, both Christie and Paul lay claim on working class whites, but for different reasons, and still might have to battle Hillary for them. The gender gap polling of Perot voters in 2016, if it ever gets done, will be most interesting.

So why libertarian populism to get to the Perot voter? 2. It might work, and 1. They have nothing else. Or the other way around.