

The New York Times

One Group Is Unreservedly Happy About the Election Results

Libertarians are pleased to have likely dodged the bullet of one-party government control.

Nov. 8, 2020

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Lots of people on the left and right found reasons to be a little unhappy, or downright miserable, about the election. The Republican Party lost the White House; Democrats have lost ground in the House, and their path to a Senate majority seems very narrow.

But there is one group of people unreservedly happy — even ecstatic — about the results: those who lean libertarian.

They got almost everything they wanted. On the one hand, Joe Biden has a friendlier record on trade and immigration, and on the other, they avoided the burst of spending that inevitably comes with unified control of the federal government.

Old-school debt and deficit hawks will also be pleased, too, but libertarians are ecstatic. As one writer at Reason wondered, perhaps speaking for many libertarians, “Is this the greatest election of my lifetime?”

In the early years of the Trump administration, with Republicans in control of Congress, the country saw a steady rise in spending and ballooning deficits and debt. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas might not have been quite right when he said that, after all, President Trump “didn’t campaign on cutting the debt.” Actually, Mr. Trump did, but in a throwaway manner, while putting more stress on continued, even increased, big spending and debt.

And as is so often the case with one-party control, as in Mr. Trump’s first years, big spending took hold. According to the Cato Institute, over Mr. Trump’s four years, spending went up by a total of 10 percent. Something similar happened under George W. Bush: Spending shot up 24 percent.

But what really seems like an effective arrangement for controlling spending is a Democratic president with Republicans in charge of at least one body of Congress. During the first four years of the Barack Obama and Bill Clinton administrations, both of which included years of split control of government, spending was more restrained or even reduced. Under Mr. Clinton, spending inched up only 3 percent. In Mr. Obama’s first term, total spending actually went *down* by 10 percent.

There are ways beyond the budget that a Biden presidency could be a boon to libertarians. Mr. Trump was a disaster when it came to free trade, kicking off a huge trade war with China and “renegotiating” NAFTA so that it contained more protectionist, anti-free-market measures like wage controls.

By contrast, Mr. Biden will probably cut a more pro-trade profile. Congressional Republicans and Democrats were reluctant to give Mr. Trump trade negotiating authority, but they are more likely to give Mr. Biden that authority than they are to withhold it (despite some pressure from the party’s progressives like Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez).

Mr. Biden is likely to pursue pro-immigration reforms and policies, both in the realm of regulation and administrative practice as well as in terms of legislation. Libertarians never liked the mechanism by which President Obama established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, but they also hated President Trump’s dismantling of it — as well as his major cuts to legal immigration, big spending for a border wall and more.

Libertarians view legal immigration, and especially high-skilled workers, as an economic boon to the country and like that free trade keeps prices down for American consumers and extends our opportunities to sell abroad.

And there is also Mr. Biden’s record. Sure, he made campaign proposals for a health care public option and spending on climate programs. But he has a reputation for tough fiscal discipline relative to the rest of his party.

As vice president, he helped resolve spending stalemates and government shutdowns with that ultimate spending-slashing tool that big-spending Democrats and Republicans hated but libertarians loved: sequestration, or automatic spending caps.

As a senator, he worked hard to keep the deficit and debt under control. To take a couple of examples, in the mid-1990s, he voted for a constitutional amendment that would require the federal government to balance its budget — a position that put him at odds with a majority of the Democratic caucus. In 1997, he voted yes on a Republican budget that cut both taxes and spending.

With a Biden presidency, a McConnell-dominated Senate and a less Democratic House, libertarians get the best possible outlook on spending, debt and deficits, and these other important policy areas — while also perhaps preventing far-left nominees for important executive roles and dodging the specter of court packing.

The election will be deeply disappointing to die-hard Trumpers, Democrats hoping for a landslide and Never Trumpers eager to see the Republican Party burn. That’s a lot of people, probably even most voters.

But for some of us, it will be a win — a silver lining out of the country’s political divisions.