

The Libertarian Party Goes Alt-Right

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Third parties have a political impact far greater than their electoral successes. They are the research and development wing of the political system. Only once, during the exceptional rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s, has a third party gained enough support to actually contend for power, but there are plenty of cases where the two major parties have liberally borrowed issues and ideas from upstart rivals. Lincoln’s Republicans themselves took their stance against the expansion of slavery from the earlier Liberty Party and Free Soil Party. The Democrats under William Jennings Bryan filched (and watered down) the agenda of the People’s Party. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was similarly light-fingered in borrowing ideas from the Socialist Party and other left formations. In a more sinister vein, Richard Nixon’s “Southern strategy” and dog whistles about “law and order” were motivated by a desire to steal the thunder of George Wallace, who ran in 1968 as the nominee of the American Independent Party.

The Libertarian Party can rightly claim to be heir to this tradition of being a seedbed for policy innovations taken over by both Democrats and Republicans. If the dominant ideology of American politics since the 1970s is neoliberalism, then the Libertarian Party has truly punched above its weight, influencing trends in both economics (the diminishment of the welfare state) and social policy (the Libertarian Party championed gay rights and drug decriminalization long before the Democrats).

In defiance of this history, the Libertarian Party now seems to have entered a topsy-turvy world where it has started mimicking the Republicans. Since Donald Trump launched his presidential campaign, the dominant political story on the right has been the GOP’s becoming steadily Trumpized—a trend visible in both policy (more protectionist, more anti-immigrant, more unilateralist in foreign policy) and also cultural style (with Trump’s insult-comedian routine now de rigueur among Republican candidates).

In 2016, Gary Johnson became the most successful Libertarian candidate in history, getting nearly 4.5 million votes (or 3.3 percent of the votes cast). This was three times more than any previous Libertarian presidential candidate, including Johnson in his earlier 2012 run. Johnson

achieved this success by being closer to the kind of old-line establishment Republican that the GOP had just rejected: He was a soft-spoken, culturally moderate advocate of small government. As such, he seemed like an alternative to Trump for weary Republicans.

But despite Johnson's strong electoral showing, the Libertarian party was quickly wracked by its own internal strife thanks to a guerrilla faction that wanted to take up culture war politics.

In July 28, 2017, Jeff Deist, the president of the Mises Institute, named for libertarian economist Ludwig von Mises, published a blog post arguing that “blood and soil and God and nation still matter to people. Libertarians ignore this at the risk of irrelevance.” The phrase “blood and soil” already had an unmistakable fascist overtone—but it took on an even more gruesome connotation two weeks after the post during the infamous Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally of 2017, where an anti-racist protester was killed. The white supremacists who tried to dominate the streets of Charlottesville chanted “blood and soil.” Several of the organizers of the Charlottesville rally identified as libertarians. In the wake of that event, Nicholas Sarwark, chair of the Libertarian Party, signed an open letter warning of the dangers of fascism. Arvin Vohra, vice chair of the Libertarian Party, wrote a post arguing that the “Mises Institute has been turned into a sales funnel for the White Nationalist branch of the Alt Right.”

The ensuing arguments over “blood and soil” lead to the creation of a Mises Caucus, which aimed to overthrow the pragmatic Gary Johnson wing of the party and adopt the incendiary culture war politics of the hard right.

Writing in *Reason*, Brian Doherty, a distinguished historian of libertarianism, reports that “foes say that too many Mises Caucus members and fans downplay libertarian positions that might offend the right, are intentionally obnoxious and bullying, and are often racist.” Doherty cites a tweet posted by the New Hampshire Libertarian Party after it was taken over by the Mises Caucus: “America isn't in debt to black people. If anything it's the other way around.” That tweet ran on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and was subsequently deleted after criticism. On March 7, 2021, Jeremy Kauffman, a prominent member of the Mises Caucus, tweeted: “if 1,000 transpeople were murdered every year but there were no taxes, we'd live in a substantially more moral world. [For] reference about 40...transgender people are murdered in the US per year.” That tweet was also later deleted.

In early 2021, the Mises Caucus in California invited an anti-Semitic provocateur named Bryan Sharpe (also known as Hotep Jesus) to speak at its state convention. Angela McArdle, a leading member of the Mises Caucus, defended the invitation, saying, “I don't actually think that someone who is trying to be a truth-seeker and understand what's going on—and asked the question about whether or not Jews run Hollywood is an antisemite.”

On May 29, at the Libertarian Party Convention in Reno, McArdle won the title of chair of the party's national committee. This was a decisive victory for the Mises Caucus, which received the vote of 69 percent of delegates. The Mises Caucus is now the undisputed ruling faction of the party.

In a report for *Hatewatch*, a publication of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Creede Newton assembled evidence—circumstantial but suggestive—that the Mises Caucus is aligned

with Trumpist Republicans. David Valente, an active Libertarian Party member since 2012 who used to be an alternate member of the Libertarian National Committee, told *Hatewatch*, “The purpose of what is going on with the MC...is to sabotage the LP to sideline it over the next few years for Donald Trump.” Ashley Shade, another disaffected Libertarian Party member and former chair of the Massachusetts Libertarian Party, also spoke with *Hatewatch* and characterized the Mises Caucus as a “tool of the Republican Party.”

Whether or not the Mises Caucus is deliberately planning this, the turmoil it has inflicted on the Libertarian Party is a boon to Republicans. Speaking on *The Neoliberal Podcast*, Andy Craig, a staff writer at the Cato Institute, predicted that the Libertarian Party is “going to fade away very quickly. They are going to lose their ballot access. They basically already are bankrupt. All the donors [will] leave.”

Brian Doherty’s reporting in *Reason* supports this analysis:

Two former significant donors to the L.P., Kyle Varner and Michael Chastain, both with decades long history in the party, did say in phone interviews that the Mises turn, which they see as importing a level of racist edgelording they have no taste for, has made them stop funding L.P. candidates. Such defections are particularly relevant in this environment: The national L.P. has just had three months in a row of spending exceeding income, and the number of active donors has been falling for seven straight months.

The model here might be some political shenanigans from the 2000 election. That year, Roger Stone worked with Trump to throw the primaries of the Reform Party into disarray (Trump briefly entered the race and directed his fire at the eventual nominee, Pat Buchanan). The weakening of the Reform Party had the effect of helping the GOP. Some observers, like the late *Village Voice* reporter Wayne Barrett, speculated that this had been Stone’s goal all along. Taking the Libertarian party out as a competitive force will help consolidate the right-wing vote around the Republican Party. Once the Libertarian Party becomes a husk of its former self, the alt-right faction will continue to assist a Trumpized GOP in a way that parallels groups like the Proud Boys. MAGA Libertarians will be a potent vector for spreading bigotry on social media. The Mises Caucus are the nominal winners in the internecine libertarian wars, but the ultimate beneficiary could be Donald Trump.