



How This Election Turned Me Into A Libertarian

Even though I've previously been pragmatic about allying with politicians I disagree with, both major parties' candidates are so bad I'm voting Libertarian with a clean conscience.

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This election has turned me into a libertarian. Yes, given that I work at the Cato Institute, that statement seems either confusing or trite, but hear me out.

It's not that my political views have changed; I wasn't a secret socialist or paleo-conservative fifth-columnist in the heart of the libertarian mother ship. While I don't agree with all my colleagues on everything, no two libertarians are in complete accord anyway (and are more likely to be found arguing about whose libertarianism is purer). (For the record, I fight the hypothetical and consider myself a classical liberal, so anarcho-capitalists and liberalaltarians may commence criticism.)

Nor is it that I'm now a capital-L Libertarian, offering a full-throated endorsement of Gary Johnson. I mean, of the declared candidates, of course I'd go for one who's fit for office. But a lot could happen between today and November 8. Clinton or Trump, or both, may not end up on their respective parties' ballot lines, or an independent could enter whom I like more. Anyway, none of this means I'm throwing my lot in with the Libertarian Party itself.

No, turning libertarian has little to do with either ideology or partisanship. Instead, it's an attitudinal shift.

I Care about What Politics Does

I'd always been a pretty political guy: I've enjoyed following the strategy, debating tactics, arguing historical counter-factuals, and memorizing statistics. It's like sports, except at the end you're left with more than just entertainment—which is scary when you realize that the winners of this “game” get, instead of trophies, power to control other people.

A lot of libertarians aren't like that. Not that my fellow travelers in the liberty movement are unique in that way; most Americans aren't political animals. For good reason: as George Mason University law professor (and Cato adjunct scholar) Ilya Somin has detailed in his excellent and often counterintuitive book "Democracy and Political Ignorance," it makes no rational sense learning political intricacies when your vote is insignificant. Indeed, one measure of a country's health and stability is how little its citizens feel a need to engage with politics. People are busy with jobs, kids, hobbies, and other much more important concerns.

Of course, self-identified libertarians are very much into small-p politics—honing ideological consistency, identifying the best policies, criticizing government—but many simply think getting "into the muck" of capital-P Politics is a waste of time, especially when both major parties have strong statist aspects. This is probably most true for the staunchest non-interventionists.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with that perspective, but I've never been that way. I care a lot about political outcomes and have figured that the best way I can advance them, especially given my skill set and particular interest in legal policy and judicial nominations, is to work within the system rather than ignore it.

Voting With a Clean Conscience

Professionally I build unconventional coalitions, engaging whichever politicians and interest groups can help on any given issue. For example, I've joined dozens of organizations on Supreme Court amicus briefs and regularly meet with a range of politicians. But politics is different from the policy world in that you're more often choosing the lesser of two evils, working against a candidate's opponent more than for the candidate himself. That often involves supporting candidates who don't score very high on libertarian purity tests, like George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney, but whose party professes to care about and be influenced by classical-liberal ideas and whose executive and judicial appointments I would prefer.

This year, when both the Republicans and Democrats are poised to nominate the most godawful presidential candidates imaginable, count me out of conventional politics.

Granted, I only became a citizen two years ago, so this will be the first presidential election where I can actually vote. (My first non-presidential vote, in 2014, was to legalize marijuana in D.C.—not that Johnson needs to make it his leading issue—after which I promptly moved to Virginia.) But I consider voting to be my least important political activity, which is a good thing given how unpalatable the suitors are for my first time.

No, this year, when both the Republicans and Democrats are poised to nominate the most godawful presidential candidates imaginable, count me out of conventional politics. I'll instead be with the too-cool-for-school black-leather-jacket crowd that decrees "a pox on both your houses" before retiring to its absinthe snifters and e-cigars.

So far, I've found being an attitudinal libertarian to be cathartic. It's a better way of dealing with this political season's frustrations than arguing with your conscience about whether "Crooked Hillary" or "Fraudulent Donald" would be least unacceptable.

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