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Anti-Libertarian Presidents

Deciding which politician to support has long been frustrating for libertarians. Both the liberal and conservative perspectives conflict with cherished libertarian views, so few Democrats or Republicans present a package that libertarians can embrace with enthusiasm.

Libertarians do find common ground with conservatives on some issues, and with liberals on others. Roughly, libertarians are economic conservatives and foreign and social policy liberals. So, depending on the pressing issue of the day, libertarians can sometimes identify one candidate or another as "the lesser of the evils."

Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, however, have presented libertarians with a more fundamental dilemma: when judged by actions rather than rhetoric, both are anti-libertarian on almost every issue.

Consider first President Bush. Libertarians expected to disagree on social and foreign policy, and they did. President Bush pursued a war in Iraq, pushed back against legal abortion, restricted stem cell research, maintained "don't ask don't tell," and opposed gay marriage. None of this pleased libertarians, but none came as a surprise.

The frustration with President Bush concerned his support for policies antithetical to free-market economics and small government. These included No Child Left Behind, the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill, TARP, and the auto industry bailouts.

President Bush did deliver two tax cuts, which libertarians supported under the assumption they would be accompanied by spending cuts. The latter never materialized. Spending grew markedly on national defense, a new Medicare prescription drug benefit, earmarks, and discretionary programs in general.

Libertarians therefore found little to endorse in President Bush's performance on any issue. Small

wonder then that independents -- a.k.a. "soft libertarians" -- abandoned Republicans for Barack Obama and the Democrats in 2008. Obama seemed unlikely to be an improvement on economic policy, but he at least seemed to share libertarian views on foreign and social policy.

That hope, however, has been dashed by President Obama's first two years.

The first disappointment has been the administration's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although Obama has continued the Bush-initiated drawdown in Iraq, lowering troop strength by about 94,000, he has also ramped up troop levels in Afghanistan, adding about 65,000, and expanded drone strikes in Pakistan. Thus U.S. entanglement in the region has barely changed.

On policies toward homosexuality, President Obama has again disappointed libertarians, maintaining his pre-election position that civil unions are acceptable but gay marriage is not. The administration has talked a good game about ending "don't ask don't tell," but the policy is still in place. Indeed, the administration recently won a lawsuit that defends the policy.

Immigration is another area where libertarians thought Obama might improve existing policy. Yet the administration has simply offered endless blather about tighter border security while doing nothing to create more legal immigration, such as guest-worker programs or expanded visas for highly skilled foreigners.

Perhaps the worst disappointment for libertarians has been the administration's stance on marijuana. Attorney General Eric Holder initially pleased both libertarians and liberals by announcing the Justice Department would not enforce federal law against medicinal marijuana in places where it is legal under state law.

Yet the administration dealt marijuana legalization a crushing blow in mid-October by announcing it would vigorously enforce federal marijuana prohibition in California, even if Proposition 19, the state legalization initiative, were to pass.

On top of all this, President Obama's economic policies have been just as dismal as libertarians expected. The president voted for TARP as a senator and continued his support after the election. The president made fiscal stimulus a priority, continued the auto industry bailouts, adopted a mortgage modification program, and pulled out all the stops for Obamacare. Absent the 2010 mid-terms, moreover, Obama would have pushed for card check, cap and trade, and expiration of the Bush tax cuts for high-income households.

On virtually all counts, therefore, President Obama has been just as anti-libertarian as President Bush. Unsurprisingly, libertarian-leaning voters again shifted allegiances in the November elections, abandoning Democrats for Republicans. Why accept liberal economic policies if they do not at least generate libertarian social and foreign policies?

The lesson for libertarians is that liberals and conservatives are equally bad, just on different issues. Voters who want more libertarian government -- and many do -- should vote for gridlock. Or for a real libertarian, if they can find one.

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