

# The Washington Times

## A case for the libertarian

*Neither liberals nor conservatives recognize their inconsistencies*

By Jeffrey Miron

July 17, 2014

As the American political scene becomes ever more polarized, citizens of all political views have tired of both the liberal and conservative perspectives. The two “mainstream” perspectives strike many as inconsistent and hypocritical, and far more similar than different. Both advocate large and intrusive government, albeit in different arenas, despite rhetoric that claims otherwise.

What these disillusioned Americans really want is libertarianism, which advocates small government across the board. Misleading or one-sided characterizations notwithstanding, libertarianism is precisely the “third way” that many Americans desire.

Libertarianism is not the claim that individuals are always rational, or that markets are always efficient, or that the distribution of income under laissez-faire capitalism is always “fair.” Rather, it is the claim that, despite the imperfections of private arrangements, government interventions usually make things worse. Thus, non-intervention is the better policy.

Libertarians, for example, oppose drug prohibition because it generates more harm — violent black markets — than drug use itself. Libertarians oppose many economic regulations because they entrench the large existing firms that can more easily absorb the added costs, thereby reducing competition and harming consumers. Libertarians oppose foreign interventions because they cost far more than initially acknowledged while failing to help either America or the target countries. Libertarians also oppose numerous interventions, such as trade restrictions or agricultural subsidies, because they distort market efficiency while arbitrarily enriching some Americans at the expense of others.

A crucial feature of libertarianism is consistency: It applies a skeptical lens to all aspects of government, whether economic, social or foreign. In every case, libertarianism asks calmly but rigorously whether intervention actually yields better outcomes, regardless of whether that implies a “conservative” or “liberal” policy conclusion. Libertarianism sticks to its principles.

Conservatism, in contrast, claims allegiance to individual freedom yet happily endorses drug prohibition and bans on homosexual marriage. Conservatism asserts affection for free markets, but endorses crony capitalism, such as the Export-Import Bank. Conservatives are enthusiastic

about foreign policy interventions when a Republican controls the White House, but far more skeptical otherwise. Conservatives endorse states' rights regarding gun control, but not abortion, drug policy or same-sex marriage.

Liberalism is no better. It defends a woman's right to choose an abortion, yet challenges parents' right to choose parochial schools for their children. Liberals rant about poverty yet object to greater low-skill immigration, which would help people far poorer than most existing residents. Liberals criticize foreign-policy interventions when Republicans control the White House, but support them more readily when a Democrat is in power. Liberals are equally inconsistent as conservatives on states' rights, just in the opposite direction.

Thus, libertarianism differs radically from both liberalism and conservatism. It opposes crony capitalism for energy companies, whether green or fossil. Libertarians oppose federal policies in favor of state control, whether regarding guns, schools, marriage, abortion or drugs. Libertarians oppose government infringements of personal liberties in all areas, save cases where one person's freedom harms another's (e.g., murder).

This consistency does not, by itself, make libertarianism "right," but it shows libertarianism's unique perspective on government. Libertarianism holds that government causes many current problems, so more government is unlikely to reduce these problems. The best approach is to remove the existing government that causes or exacerbates the problem in the first place.

Can libertarianism command substantial support from the American electorate?

Hard-core libertarianism — the version that opposes almost every government policy adopted since the 1790s — does not (yet) have wide appeal. Truly minimal government seems to scare many people (even though the United States became an economic and military power over its first 100 years or so with far less government than now).

"Soft" libertarianism has considerable appeal, though, since many have come to recognize the negatives of too much government. A 2010 study by my Cato colleagues David Boaz and David Kirby characterized 14 percent of American voters as libertarian. A 2009 Gallup poll estimated 23 percent as having libertarian views, and a Zogby poll found that 44 percent identified as libertarian, agreeing their views were "fiscally conservative but socially liberal."

This degree of support does not mean libertarians can yet win national office, but they can push conservatives and liberals toward more consistent views. Libertarian-leaning liberals can nudge Democrats to support cuts in entitlements so these programs do not bankrupt the country. Libertarian-leaning conservatives can push Republicans to support marijuana legalization, expanded immigration or homosexual marriage out of genuine respect for individual liberty. The combination could create a "libertarian-middle" that all politicians would have to accommodate.

The time is ripe for this libertarian awakening.

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