

The Washington Post

Libertarianism isn't Republicanism. Trump haters should find another place to hide.

Don't dilute the Libertarian Party just to beat Donald Trump.

Aaron Ross Powell

May 25, 2016

Now that Donald Trump has all but wrapped up the Republican nomination — and, with it, foreclosed any lingering claims that the GOP is the party of limited-government conservatism — a small cohort of notable Republicans have signaled that they are shifting their affiliation to the Libertarian Party. The Washington Examiner's Tim Carney, already leaning that way, tweeted that he's making the switch and longtime Republican strategist Mary Matalin recently explained that she would “never vote for Hillary and never Trump means always liberty. Hence, Libertarian.”

Wrong.

If all that these converts see is a safe house where they can ride out the storm, they're missing the point: The libertarian ideal and the Libertarian Party stand as reminders that neither of the two major parties is committed to the principle that individuals are superior to the state. And in this election year, if fear of a President Trump results in libertarianism morphing into Republicanism-lite, it would cease to serve that purpose. While I'm not active in Libertarian Party politics, as a small-“L” libertarian, I want no part of diluting this core principle just to boost electoral success.

But I get it. The GOP has been taken over by a know-nothing vulgarian. For Republicans still invested in their party's traditional priorities — big military budgets, tax cuts and morality-based social policy — Trump's ever-changing views on nearly every issue present a real dilemma.

Libertarianism, though, isn't a subsidiary of Republicanism. Like Republicans, we want limited government, but we reject the corporate welfare of auto-industry bailouts, the military adventurism of the Iraq War and the interference with individual liberty represented by initiatives such as North Carolina's H.B. 2 — all policies that Republicans embrace. Matalin, a former adviser to President George W. Bush, and other Republican expats surely believe in liberty as a concept, but her support for Bush's big-government conservatism suggests that at heart, she's a statist. Which is her prerogative. But it places her, and many other Republicans, at loggerheads with libertarianism.

That's the risk for libertarians if Republicans turned off by Trump migrate toward the Libertarian Party and change our ideological center of gravity. In March, the Federalist's Ben Domenech sketched out a scenario where, "If the #NeverTrump people want a protest vote, their best path is a Libertarian takeover, with someone who is Libertarianish on some issues — pot, prostitution, marriage — and yet pro-life and pro-religion enough to win over the votes of the holdouts to the Trump machine." Last week, former two-term governor William Weld (R-Ma.) announced that he is teaming up with former two-term governor Gary Johnson (R-N.M.) to contend for the Libertarian nomination when the party convenes in Orlando this weekend. Johnson, of course, was the LP's nominee in 2012. And Weld's brand of fiscal conservatism, combined with tolerance on social issues, offers, as my Cato Institute colleague David Boaz writes, "a clear alternative to Trump and Clinton." But Weld's record is really that of a moderate Republican. Shortly after the start of the Iraq War, he praised Bush's response to "the international challenge." And, as Jesse Walker and Brian Doherty report at Reason, he supported eminent domain and using tax dollars for economic stimulus, among other decidedly non-libertarian positions. Which still might leave a Johnson-Weld ticket as the least-bad option in 2016, but if it represents the start of a new LP status quo, then it's bad for libertarianism, and America.

My concern isn't ex-Republicans voting for Libertarian candidates. I'd welcome that. (I'd also welcome the votes of Sen. Bernie Sanders's supporters who can't stomach Hillary Clinton's hawkish foreign policy and uncomfortably close ties to Wall Street interests.) My concern, rather, is about the future of an idea.

While there are genuine disagreements among those of us who claim the libertarian label, and while the Libertarian Party isn't the libertarian movement, libertarianism, construed broadly, takes a fundamentally different approach to the relationship between government and the governed than either of the two major parties. Unlike today's Democratic and Republican parties, which mostly function as repositories for candidates and policy prescriptions calibrated to win elections, libertarianism is, above all else, a political philosophy. One that is at odds with the GOP's anti-gay, pro-subsidy, anti-immigrant, pro-interventionist platform, and conservative priorities like punishing nonviolent offenders for buying, selling and using drugs, engaging in sex work or hiring undocumented immigrants. Libertarian ideas stem from our Founders' commitment to the personal and economic liberty that has been the lifeblood of Western civilization since the Enlightenment. Ideas antithetical to Trumpism, yes. But also to contemporary Republicanism.

The danger, then, of trying to accommodate never-Trumpers would be the watering down of libertarian values in favor of we're-not-like-those-other-guys tribalism and ever more government.

A libertarian can't win this election. But the Libertarian Party can be our national conscience, providing an ideological check on ceaseless Republican and Democratic expansion of the state. Without at least one party standing consistently for liberty, we're worse off as a country.

I really feel for Republicans. Trump has taken a party that already had a tenuous relationship to its stated values and thrown out whatever was left. To boot, he has ginned up the body politic on white-identity politics and the strongman's false lure of a government that can solve all its

citizens' problems. He is, indeed, a horrifying development. But libertarianism isn't Republicanism. I hope more Republicans become libertarian. But if they want to continue pushing the same issues they're already selling, the Libertarian Party is the wrong place to do it.

Aaron Ross Powell is a Cato Institute research fellow and editor of Libertarianism.org.