A Few More Thoughts on Libertarians and Tents

Ben Domenech · Jun 16 at 8:33am

Yesterday's post clearly struck a nerve with several of you, both libertarian and non-libertarian. I'd like to engage in a bit of follow-up to clarify a thing or two.

First, regarding my comment that libertarians have never amounted to anything as a political movement. I intended this to be a distinction, but perhaps I should've given it more emphasis. Instead, I'd argue libertarians *have* amounted to a great deal as a *policy* movement. Where political movements demand tent-construction and coalition-building to achieve a critical mass of votes from the electorate, movements designed simply to win a particular policy argument within a legislative or legal arena have more to do with the intellectual and historical strength of the argument advanced. Here, libertarians have thrived.

A perfect example is about to come down from the Supreme Court, within the health care policy space where I work. It was libertarians like Randy Barnett, and libertarians alone, who advanced the (much-mocked) argument that the individual mandate was unconstitutional, something even many conservative Republicans didn't believe at the time.

Yet time and again, we see libertarians function as their own worst enemies when it comes to building support for ideas, forming factional lines which prevent them from working with other people of like mind on a significant portion of their policy views, often because of cultural divides over hot button social issues.

These cultural differences have lead some libertarians into ill-thought alliances with the left - the short-lived liberaltarian movement was an example of this, but so are the voting patterns of many in the libertarian movement. Much as I respect my friends at Reason, I am still aghast at the number of them and their colleagues who voted for and ardently supported Barack Obama in 2008. These libertarian commentators pronounced McCain-Palin as due for punishment for "eight years of military adventurism, unfettered executive power, and disregard for civil liberties" as representing "a southern-centered party based on social division and cultural resentment", one "in thrall to troglodytes".

Here's a general rule of thumb: if your votes over the past decade were for Ralph Nader, John Kerry, and Barack Obama - as more than one of those prominent libertarians admitted - stop fooling yourself about which tent you're in.

I once had a conversation with a fairly prominent urban libertarian who went on a lengthy discourse about how the future of the right in America depended on the Republican Party finally getting its act together and rejecting the "Bible-thumping fetus-obsessed" in order to achieve political victory. I let him go on for a bit before pointing out the error of his calculations, from my perspective - that in fact, without the support of the faith and freedom folks, the Republican Party would've gone the way of the Whigs, that Ron Paul himself has been a strong and consistently pro-life leader in the Congress, and that if he'd like to see how a fiscally conservative pro-choicer would do at the box office, he should use the Gary Johnson campaign as a barometer.

Libertarians are often absolutely correct about the direction of policy because they alone are willing to ask the right questions - questions such as, "should government even be doing this thing?" - whether or not they have the right answers. Those who I work with in the activist movements at the state level are also often socially conservative themselves, or at least traditionalist "leave us alone" types, and therefore are more pragmatic about cooperating with conservatives to achieve policy change. My hope is that more of these individuals will rise through the ranks to prominence within the libertarian movement. Without that happening, I suspect it will remain limited by this unfortunate factionalism, and instead, the more pragmatic types will stick to what they've been doing: trying to win arguments within the Republican Party, not outside of it.