



Libertarians Should NOT Vote Republican (or Democrat)

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The Wall Street Journal has published an article on what has now become a distinct genre in political journalism: why libertarians should vote Republican. Normally these articles warrant no rebuttal, amounting to little more than hysteria about “Obama-the-Socialist,” but this piece was written by Georgetown Law Professor Randy Barnett, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He defended the medical marijuana patient in the Supreme Court case *Gonzalez v. Raich* and was the primary architect of the legal challenges to Obamacare.

Randy Barnett is a serious libertarian intellectual, but his argument against voting his principles is unsound. He notes that our first-past-the-post, winner-take-all system directs each party to advocate moderate policies relative to the base of the party. It’s why politicians “rush to the center” after primaries—they know they need voters in the center, not the extreme. But then Barnett states, “To the extent that a third party is successful, it will drain votes from the coalition party to which it is closest and help elect the coalition party that is further removed from its interests.”

But his conclusion—that libertarians should abandon the Libertarian Party—simply does not follow from his premises. If it’s true that our system encourages the two parties to ignore the radical elements of their bases, why should libertarians want to join that club? Libertarians, by definition, advocate policies that are more radical than their nearest counterparts in either major party.

The Libertarian Party does drain votes from the party closest to them, and in theory, that is the Republican Party, which supposedly stands for libertarian values: individual liberty, personal responsibility, and limited government. But these facts lead to the exact opposite conclusion: that in order to be taken seriously by the GOP, libertarians must break away in large enough numbers to constitute a substantial electoral threat.

Libertarians should want to drain votes from the party that claims to value individual liberty in order to punish them for nominating candidates and pursuing policies that consistently and aggressively violate that principle. If Republicans can simply continue taking the libertarian vote for granted, as they have, the GOP will wind up with candidates like Mitt Romney, John McCain, Bob Dole, and the Bushes.

Consider how Mitt Romney started treating Latino voters after he secured the Republican nomination. He lied, obscured, and outright reversed his previous positions in an effort to

regain the Hispanic vote. He promised not to deport them. He fell over himself in a desperate attempt to garner their support. Why? Because he knows they might vote Democrat, or not at all. George W. Bush endorsed an immigration reform plan specifically because it would be good for his party.

If libertarians vote third party in large enough numbers—even one percent of the vote in key states—Republicans may actually start making concessions in our direction as well. This isn't just hypothetical. Consider Barnett's article itself, and the dozens of others that have been published in the last few months begging libertarians to vote for Romney. Can you imagine this happening in 1996, 2000, or 2004?

Libertarians are receiving unprecedented attention from Republicans because they have publicly broken from the mainstream Republican Party for the first time. Before 2004, the socially-tolerant, fiscally conservative vote went to the GOP every election. But their 2004 attempt to punish Bush failed because by voting for Kerry, the GOP never saw who they lost. To consolidate libertarians as a clear electoral threat, it took Ron Paul uniting these voters as a distinct force in 2008 and the Libertarian Party nominating a legitimate candidate in 2012, Gov. Gary Johnson, who came with strong executive experience and a libertarian record on both civil liberties and spending.

Now Republican partisans are scared and rightly so. What the GOP has done to the brand of limited government is shameful, and it deserves repudiation, not blind support. When libertarians point to the last experiment with unified Republican rule under George Bush, Barnett has nothing to say except to assert that there is no other option. Blanket support is different from supporting specific Republicans. Officials who are generally pro-liberty, like Ron Paul, Rand Paul, Justin Amash, and other state and local representatives, deserve to be rewarded for their efforts. But closing your eyes and voting straight-ticket Republican won't make this country any freer.

Even if Barnett is right that this is the most practical way to influence Republicans, libertarians should object, on moral grounds, to backing their nominee. If you vote for Mitt Romney or Barack Obama this election, you will be voting for a man who supports state-sponsored terrorism, undeclared executive wars, drone strikes on civilians, indefinite detention, secret prisons, warrantless searches, electronic spying, assassination of American citizens, torture, and the prosecution of whistleblowers who expose such depravities to the world. There are crimes you can stomach, but there are others that are so far outside the realm of human decency that a vote for a man who advocated them makes you culpable. If silence gives consent, a vote gives approval.