



Libertarians and Democrats Need to Fall in Love Again

Trump's authoritarianism warrants a return of the "liberalitarian."

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These are dark days in Washington, but a tiny bit of good news broke on Monday—an earnest across-the-aisle gesture, made in good faith, that should give heart to the anti-Trump resistance in its infancy, and perhaps even suggest a path forward for defending American democracy.

In a show of solidarity with their left-leaning brethren, the libertarian group Students for Liberty posted [an open letter](#) to College Democrats, commiserating about the direction of the country and offering to work with them on issues where they agree—namely immigration, criminal justice reform, aversion to military intervention, and First Amendment rights. They even offered resources to Democrats.

“We provide grants, training, activism resources, and access to a network of pro-liberty students not just in the United States, but all around the world,” the group wrote. “Whatever your issue of choice is, we’re here to help make sure pro-liberty beliefs, whether expressed by libertarians or liberals/progressives, are represented on college campuses across the country (and world)! We’ll never subject you to a purity test or demand allegiance to any particular candidate or approach. As long as your message is pro-liberty, we’re more than happy to help.”

Politics periodically makes for strange bedfellows, and cooperation between libertarians and the left is a storied, if sporadic, tradition.

As Ed Kilgore [wrote in *The New Republic*](#) in 2010, “These two groups were driven together, in the main, by common hostility to huge chunks of the [George W.] Bush administration’s agenda: endless, pointless wars; assaults on civil liberties; cynical vote-buying with federal dollars; and statist panders to the Christian right.” This alliance peaked in the 2006 midterms, when [nearly half](#) of libertarian voters backed Democratic congressional candidates. Everyone from Daily Kos’ [Markos Moulitsas](#) to the Cato Institute’s Brink Lindsey were hailing the arrival of the libertarian Democrat—or “liberalarians,” as Lindsey coined them a [New Republic](#) essay that [sparked](#) political [opinion](#) for years to come.

The problems with a permanent alliance were many. Writing for ThinkProgress in 2013, Zack Beauchamp cited Public Religion Research Institute polling that showed rank-and-file libertarians are primarily “concerned with shrinking the state’s economic footprint to the exclusion of other libertarian priorities.” Therefore, unlike libertarian intellectuals—people like Lindsey, that is—these voters behave like Republican partisans.

That was certainly true in 2008, when libertarians abandoned Democrats, allied themselves with Republicans, and opposed the activist government of the Obama presidency—especially healthcare reform. Unable to imagine a sufficient reconciling of differences in the near term, Kilgore wrote, “Cancel the Valentine’s Day hearts and flowers; this romance is dead.”

Given the threat of a Trump presidency, now is the time to rekindle the old flame.

Almost a decade to the month since Lindsey wrote his manifesto, American liberty faces unprecedented peril. President-elect Donald Trump is so indifferent to the Constitution, when he’s not openly hostile to it, that there’s reasonable discussion of liberal democracy collapsing during his tenure. Democrats need all the allies they can find to fight him, and many Americans with genuinely libertarian values could be part of an opposition coalition.

Take Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson, the former Republican governor of New Mexico who received more than four million votes in this year’s general election. He opposed Trump’s signature plans to build a border wall with Mexico and deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and he once told BuzzFeed that libertarians were more natural political allies of the left than the mainstream GOP.

They’re even less natural allies for Trumpism. Americans who want minimal government intervention in the economy, foreign affairs, and the personal choices of citizens should be alarmed by the president-elect. He’s hardly an opponent of government spending, and he’s likely to spend money on things many libertarians oppose. Noah Rothman listed several of them for *National Review* last Friday, with conservative estimates of their price tags: Ivanka Trump’s childcare plan (\$2.5 billion), public works and infrastructure projects (\$1 trillion), materials for the wall (\$17 billion), and deportation of 11 million immigrants (\$300 billion).

At minimum, libertarians should certainly be concerned with how the president-elect will wield executive power. Will he try to use National Security Agency to spy on his enemies? (Edward Snowden is already warning about increased domestic surveillance under Trump’s presidency.) More immediately, what about the Justice Department? With his history of litigiousness, will Trump prosecute his political opponents? Will he fulfill campaign pledges to bring back torture in the form of waterboarding and use our increasingly militarized police in a “law and order” crackdown? He’s utter contemptuous of protesters and the press; there’s really no telling what he might do to put down dissent.

Lindsey’s dream of a permanent fusion between liberalism and libertarianism may be impossible, but this is another moment when issue-based cooperation between these two factions is vital. If they unite where they agree—organizing together and pressuring Washington—it could help to neutralize some of the worse of Trump’s authoritarian agenda.

Libertarian leadership could emerge in Congress. Maybe Rand Paul can corral enough Republicans together with Democrats in the Senate to, for example, block hawkish nominees for secretary of state; he's already crusading against two candidates, Bush-era United Nations Ambassador John Bolton and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Maybe Trump critics like senators Mike Lee and Jeff Flake will join Paul. There are plenty of libertarian-leaning Republicans in the House, too.

The trouble is that many of these members aren't doctrinaire libertarians, which means they overlap less with liberals. They'll also be subject to tremendous political pressure to fall in line—from the White House, from their leadership, and from their many constituents who supported Trump. Still, if the new president's popularity is low, libertarian Republicans could find ways to oppose him without surrendering small-government principles.

One model would be the 2013 bill to meaningfully reform the NSA. It nearly passed the House, failing on a razor-thin vote, and it was championed by an ideological odd couple from Michigan: liberal Democrat John Conyers and libertarian Republican Justin Amash. In a Trump-inspired political emergency, coalitions like this one would need to succeed, putting principles ahead of party to take on the president.

Wherever libertarians organize in opposition to Trump—from college campuses to Capitol Hill—Democrats should be ready to find common ground with them. Against his authoritarianism, liberals and libertarians should link arms, hoist that Gadsden flag high, and declare together: “Don't tread on me.”