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Where Do Libertarians Belong in American Politics?

Brian Doherty | January 21, 2010

Some interesting chatter at *National Review Online* between *Reason* magazine columnist Veronique de Rugy and Jonah Goldberg on the proper, or expected, place for serious libertarians in American politics, hooked off the Cato study on libertarian voters that Katherine Mangu-Ward talked about earlier.

From de Rugy, defending libertarians as not fickle and confusing when it comes to party affiliation, but merely tough and principled:

What we want is more freedom in our personal and economic lives. Sadly, over the years, no matter who has been in power, the government has grown. In fact, the story is even sadder. In theory, the Democrats want more government in our economic lives and less in our private lives while the Republicans want less government in our economic lives but aren't opposed to a certain level of government intervention in our personal lives. That's the theory. In reality, when Republicans or Democrats have been in power, they have done a poor job at defending our freedoms, even the ones they supposedly believe in.

As long as politicians fail to defend our freedom consistently, it is likely that libertarian-leaning voters will likely fail to commit to either group — not because they are capricious, but because they believe that more freedom is the way to a happier world for all of us.

Indeed, de Rugy, indeed. But Jonah Goldberg thinks she's only talking about a very tiny number of truly serious libertarians--you know, *Reason* magazine libertarians. But when talking about the larger group of voters that Cato's Boaz and Kirby are speaking of, we gotta realize that the hardcore libertarians:

don't come close to constituting a major voting block. I respect folks who seriously believe in liberty-maximization in all spheres of life, but that is not a power-brokering constituency in American politics and never will be. Many left-leaning self-described "libertarians" are libertarian (libertine?) on social-issues but Naderites on economic issues. Many conservatives are libertarian on economic and federalism issues, but un-libertarian on all sorts of issues like gay marriage or drugs....

While I'm not a big fan of third parties, a serious Libertarian party would be the least objectionable — to me at least — because I think it would help pull both parties in a mostly healthy direction. But I am dubious it will ever happen.

That's alas too often the end of any sober consideration of serious libertarian hopes: nice idea, but don't see much likelihood of it happening. (I can see the sense in Goldberg's declaration that leaving both parties, rather than shifting from one to the other, is the best way for libertarian-leaning voters to make it impossible for the two majors to miss exactly *why* they are losing some of their support. Shifts from one party to the other can be spun in many, many ways, as see all the contradictory chatter over what Scott Brown's victory *really* says about voters feelings today.)

There are certainly many, many serious libertarian thinkers and activists who have felt the same way, that short-horizon libertarian political victories seem wildly improbable; which is never enough to make the case that libertarian activism, intellectual work, or even voting (though I don't advocate it myself) are a waste of time in keeping the world of politics from being even more, if you can imagine it, out of control.