

# The Politic

## David Boaz, Executive Vice President of the Cato Institute

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**DAVID BOAZ IS** the executive vice president of libertarian think tank, The Cato Institute. He wrote *Libertarianism: A Primer* in 1997, which was updated in 2015 as *The Libertarian Mind: A Manifesto for Freedom*. Mr. Boaz has also had his articles featured in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, among other publications.

**The Politic:** *I'd like to start by talking about your book, **The Libertarian Mind** and your stance on libertarianism more generally. How do you define libertarianism in your book?*

**David Boaz:** Well, in my book the very first line is “Libertarianism is the philosophy of freedom.” And that sums it up. It’s the philosophy of personal and economic freedom – those sometimes get separated in the United States. A somewhat more complicated definition is: libertarianism is the idea that adult individuals have the right and the responsibility to make the important decisions about their own lives, and I think every word in that is important. I think rules for children are not necessarily the same as for adults. We’re talking about individuals because those are the people who have the moral authority to make decisions. People have the right to make decisions about their own lives but that necessarily implies they have the responsibility. If they’re going to make decisions, they have to be willing to take the consequences, be responsible for what decisions they make.

**What would you like readers to take away from your book?**

Well, I would like them to become convinced libertarians. But, more broadly I would like readers to understand that the fundamental tradition of the modern West is the idea of freedom and of constraints on the power of government. So, libertarianism is just a continuation of the classical liberalism that began with John Locke and Adam Smith and exists today. And I would

like people to understand that the red republican conservatism and blue democratic liberalism do not exhaust the possible sides in ideological debates.

***What was your inspiration for writing your original book in 1997?***

I think the inspiration then was simply that I didn't think there was a contemporary book on libertarianism that I wanted to recommend to people. There were plenty of great libertarian books, depending on exactly how you define libertarian. But we could say John Locke and Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill and Milton Friedman and FA Hayek. But all of those had been written at least a generation earlier, and I thought there should be a contemporary statement of libertarianism today, so that was the original inspiration.

***In your book, and I believe this is in your updated version, The Libertarian Mind, you talk a lot about the threat of government surveillance. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about this and the implications that it has for individual freedom.***

I think most people have a sense of privacy. We like to have a private space. We like to know our thoughts and our activities, if we don't choose to make them public, are private, and the idea that there's a government database that knows everything about us is sort of frightening. The idea that the government is literally watching us... that was the line in 1984—"Big Brother is watching you." That's what we recoil against. It seems to go to our personal autonomy, the idea that government agents are watching us, are compiling data on us, are taking notes. Although, that's one of the problems with the modern surveillance era – you don't have to hire agents to take notes. It's all in computers, and so any time a government agent wants to know about you, they don't have to have picked you out and taken notes about you. There's a lot of information in there, and I think it does threaten our privacy and our freedom.

***That leads to my next question – if we were to live in a truly libertarian society, what would freedom in America mean to you?***

Well, go back to my definition. It means that adult individuals have the right and the responsibility to make the important decisions about their own lives. So that means the money I earn, I get to keep and spend in the way I choose. It means that if I own property, I can decide what to do with that property. It means I can read what I want, smoke what I want, marry whom I want, make all of those decisions for myself, while respecting the decisions of other people. So that the purpose of government in that society is to protect us from threats to our freedom – to our life, liberty, and property.

***I think that libertarianism is particularly relevant today, in what's going on in politics. Do you see an intersection of Trump's policies and ideals and libertarianism? Some people think that he is one of the most libertarian presidents to date, while others think he embodies the complete opposite of libertarianism. What do you think?***

Who on earth would think he was one of the most libertarian politicians? It seems to me that Trump campaigned on a platform of racial and religious scapegoating, which is entirely un-libertarian. He campaigned in favor of protectionism, in favor of blocking immigration, either on the basis of religion or just blocking immigration generally. Those were the main issues that

motivated him, and those are strikingly un-libertarian positions. Sure, he said he would cut taxes. All republicans say they will cut taxes, and some of them actually do. But, that didn't set him aside. The things that really made him different from other politicians were these illiberal positions on trade and immigration and a sort of authoritarian instinct: "I will fix it. I'm the only one who can fix it. Everybody else is stupid, just leave it to me." It was a kind of Mussolini-like promise that "I'm the man on the white horse and I will fix this." Now, as President, he's done all those bad things that he promised, or he's working to do so. However, I do think administrations are large and complex, and I do think some of the things that the Trump administration has done have been, at least in the economic area, somewhat libertarian. They did cut taxes. They are deregulating some things. They rescinded some regulations the Obama administration put out. All of those things you can say, "Yes, that's at least mildly libertarian." But Trump's continuing assaults on the freedom of the press, on the rule of law, on the separation of powers, to me are more important than the tax cut and the deregulation. The nature of American politics is: you get a package. You get all the policies Hillary Clinton and her administration might implement. You get all the policies Trump and his administration might implement. With Trump you get a bonus of the assaults on liberty through law.

***What implications does Trump's presidency have for libertarianism? Do you think that we might see a surge of libertarians post-Trump?***

Well I would hope so, but right now I feel very troubled. I think we're seeing a rise in authoritarian populism in many places around the world. Certainly in Russia, in Turkey, in Egypt, in Venezuela – although it's a left-leaning authoritarian populism there. In the Philippines, in Hungary, and even in France. The authoritarian populist candidate only got 35% of the vote, but that's a lot more than is comfortable. So I think that's very troubling that ideas we thought had been left in the dustbin of history are back. And that's a problem for libertarians. I hope that after getting a look at left-wing populism in Venezuela and right-wing populism in the Philippines, and Hungary, and Turkey, there will be a renewed commitment to at least liberalism, if not full-blown libertarianism. But a recognition that government tends to get too powerful and to restrict liberty, and therefore all the ways that through our constitution and the independent media and the independent judiciary and citizen action that we can constrain government are important. And I hope that people on both right and left who don't share these authoritarian instincts, will come to recognize that. Right now, I am troubled that I don't see the surge of liberal libertarian response that I would like to see.

***What do you think can be done about that? Do you think it needs to play out that way or are there certain interventions that can be done? What kind of work are you doing to encourage more people to consider the libertarian view?***

I'm doing what think tank intellectuals do. I'm writing articles, I'm talking on television, I'm making speeches, I've spoken at a number of colleges and student conferences recently. There's also political organizing, of course, which is right now most about the political organizing is going on either through the Trump movement or the democratic opposition. I'm sorry that liberal democrats have not tried to reach out and help to create a broader coalition against the problems opposed by Trump. My sense is democrats are moving to the left on a whole range of issues, that

will narrow their appeal to the moderate republicans, the centrists, the libertarian voters who might be attracted to a broader program of protection of the rule of law and protection of the market economy. Just recently, Trump is not only implementing tariffs, but his administration is talking about forcing energy companies to buy energy from failing coal and nuclear plants. That is economic dirigisme, to use the French term. Picking winners and losers in the economy and liberals, Reaganite conservatives, and libertarians all agree that's a bad idea. But we have not done a good enough job of coming together to defend liberty against all of these assaults. So, I think that's a problem. But for libertarians, the challenge is to keep on making these arguments, reminding people of the benefits of market economics, not crony capitalism. And particularly appealing to students, and that's why I'm glad that there are two national libertarian student organizations working these days. Years ago there were zero, so it's a good sign.

***Who is a candidate that you would like to see run in the next election, one who embodies the ideals of libertarianism?***

The problem with our two party political system is that you have two parties that are both sort of enthralled to anti-libertarian elements. It's very hard to get the democratic nomination without the support of labor unions and identity politics activists. It's very hard to get the republican nomination without the support of evangelicals and now, maybe without the support of the Trumpist Protectionists. So, how do you find a candidate that can transcend either one of those processes? And the lesson of 2016 may be: go try to find a really famous celebrity. We're hearing people talk about wild ideas like Marc Cuban or Howard Schultz, people who are outside the box. Maybe there's some libertarian-leaning candidate like that. Beyond that I don't know. I like Gary Johnson who was the libertarian party nominee last time. I like Bill Well who was the libertarian vice presidential candidate. I like Justin Amash, congressman from Michigan. I like Rand Paul, he may well want to run again. But, as I say I think he's a better senator than he is a politician. And so he may choose to focus his efforts on policy change in the senate, rather than another presidential campaign. Now, if you move beyond those groups, I would like to see a republican committed to free markets and the rule of law run for president in 2020 even if he's not a libertarian. That might be somebody like Senator Jeff Flake. But, whether anybody's going to do that remains very uncertain. Obviously we just don't know what the political situation is gonna be a year or so from now when these campaigns would have to get started. If the economy is still strong, then Trump may be very strong. If Trump is being impeached, then he may not be so strong. They're all possibilities.

***Libertarianism is often criticized for being unrealistic, so I was curious as to how you respond to that criticism.***

Well I think if you look at the history of the world, we went through thousands of years before liberalism and libertarianism, and there was almost no progress: economic, social, technological in those millennia. Now we've had maybe three centuries of liberalism. We've had unimaginable progress, and I would suggest that the closer we move toward libertarian values, the more progress there is. The countries of the West are obviously far richer than the countries that have not adopted the broad principles of liberalism. The countries that have the least government involvement in the economy – Hong Kong, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United

States have become richer than countries that have a larger amount of government intervention. So, I think you can look at history and today's world and see that the farther you move in the direction of libertarianism, the happier and more prosperous and more peaceful countries can be. Does that prove you can move all the way to where I would like – where government does nothing more than protect our rights? Well I can't prove that because we haven't actually tried that, but I do think the farther we move in that direction, the better society works. That seems like a pretty good argument for moving further. And if it's still better, then we should move further yet. So, any political theory may have to deal with reality. In my view, liberalism and libertarianism have done that move better. If you want an unrealistic political theory, how about the Oriental despotism and theocracy that kept the world poor for 10,000 years. If you want a dramatically unrealistic philosophy, try Marxism. Liberalism is clearly less unrealistic – let's just say it's clearly more realistic than those ideas. So, really the argument we're having is within liberalism. Some liberals believe we need more reliance on traditional social values. Even American conservatives are liberals in that sense. Some liberals believe we need a larger welfare state. Some liberals are libertarian and believe people can take care of themselves better than either the welfare state or forced traditional social values. So we're having this argument within a family really, except that now there are advocates of genuine socialism and real authoritarianism rising around the world. So, the immediate challenge is that all of us liberals need to stand together for limited government, to rule of law, personal freedom, and market economy. Then, we can fight among ourselves as to how much market economy, how much personal freedom.

***We like to ask some rapid fire questions at the end of our interviews. Where do you get your news?***

Notably the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, and then all the articles people forward to me on Facebook and Twitter.

***What is a place that you would most like to visit?***

Of places that I've been: Venice. Of places that I haven't been: Australia.

***If you were not in your current job, what do you think you would be doing?***

I have no idea. But, I'm the first in my family not to be a lawyer, and I got a good grade on the LSAT. So there's a good chance, if I hadn't come to my senses, I would've been a lawyer.

***So, you considered it?***

I did consider it but I think it was sort of one of those things... you know, my grandfather was a lawyer, my father was a lawyer, eventually my sister was a lawyer. It was just, gee here I am finishing a degree in history, what am I going to do now? I think I told my father I want to go to Washington and look for a job in politics. He thought that didn't sound like a real plan. He said, "You know if you had a law degree, you'd always have something." And so I took the LSAT, and I could have gotten into law school, but I just didn't really want to go to any more school. I wanted to start doing something, so I did come to Washington.

***Which living person do you most admire?***

Jeff Bezos – incredible entrepreneur, opened books to the world. Can I say two people?

***Of course.***

Jeff Bezos and Jimmy Wales – they are bringing knowledge to the people. You kids don't understand – you didn't use to have all the knowledge in the history of the world in your pocket. And thanks to the people who created the computer revolution and Wikipedia and Amazon, now you can put the books all into that little device in your pocket. Just incredible access to information, and in the long run I think that will be great for human freedom and human progress because it used to be that knowledge was very hard to acquire. And now it is not. If you want it, it's there.

***That's a great answer. What is your favorite book and TV show?***

I'm just going to say my favorite book is Atlas Shrugged. This is not a good answer for a libertarian, but my favorite T.V. show is Downton Abbey. I am against classism and aristocracy, but I love watching it.

***I have one last question. What advice do you have for college students?***

Learn to write. Most college students think they know how to write. As someone who reviews a lot of job applications, resumes, writing samples, I can tell you that most of them don't. And writing – from here on out writing is going to be a more important skill than it has been in the past because it's going to be so basic to the information age. And whenever I have to hire a young writer here, what I put in the email that I send around is “looking for a writer whose writing won't make me wince.” If you can just write, such that I don't wince when I read your sentences, then you're somebody I would hire in a business or a think tank for basic writing. Now, obviously if you want to be a scholar in a think tank you're going to have to do better than that. But, for basic writing, that's the standard.