

## To LP or Not LP? That is THE Question

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A few weeks ago, I dove into the question of why everyone hates libertarians, and why we hate each other. Having stirred that hornet's nest, it's now time to look into a related question: should libertarians be in the Libertarian Party ("LP")? Or one of the two duopoly parties? Or, should we just stay out of politics altogether?

First we must set forth some definitions. Merriam-Webster defines "libertarian" as follows:

*l*: an advocate of the doctrine of free will

*2a*: a person who upholds the principles of individual liberty especially of thought and action

*b*: capitalized : a member of a political party advocating libertarian principles

Libertarianism is both a philosophy *and* a political party. Not all libertarians are in the Libertarian Party, but presumably most everyone in the Libertarian Party is a libertarian. (Though, we fight over that *a lot*.) Sometimes this dichotomy is referred to as "Big L" (Libertarian Party member) versus "small l" (libertarian outside of the party.)

How many libertarians are even out there, in or out of the LP? In 2017, the Cato Institute estimated that libertarian-leaning folks may be anywhere from 7% to 22% of the United States population. That's a wide range. Seven percent is a splinter movement, and 22% is approaching electoral viability—particularly in a three-way race. Especially if that 22% can get its shit together.

Which it cannot. Even assuming the generous high end of 22%, libertarians unfortunately dilute their influence by spreading themselves across the LP, the Republican Party (or "GOP"), and the non-voting population. (There may be one or two libertarians in the Democratic Party; though that also might be a generous assumption.)

(The Free State Project is an interesting example of libertarians trying to solve this problem by... moving together *en masse* to take over a small state. Their choice was New Hampshire. The movement's electoral success there is checkered at best.)

As discussed in the previous piece, LP candidates have a dreadful track record of actually winning elections. We've been around for almost fifty years and don't have a lot to show for it electorally. As Hoover said in *Animal House*: "The Delta House has a long standing tradition of existence to its' members and to the community at large." Our tradition of... existence is particularly strong.

The LP's brand is arguably toxic. In fact, one might say our "brand" more like a "facial tattoo." Perhaps the party mascot should be an albatross instead of a porcupine. It's bad enough

that an otherwise acceptable candidate may be dragged down just by running under the party's badge. Take two examples:

Gary Johnson ran twice for governor of New Mexico as a Republican, winning both times, with vote percentages of 49.8% in a three way race in 1994 and 54.5% in a two way contest in 1998. However, when he ran for statewide office (U.S. Senate) in 2018 as a Libertarian, his percentage of the vote plummeted to 15.4% in another three way race. When compared to his 1994 race, that's a stupefying drop of 34.4 points. While New Mexico has been trending left for years, did it trend *that* far left? Or do people just not take LP candidates very seriously, even if they're known quantities with prior winning campaigns?

(He didn't exactly kick ass in New Mexico in his two LP presidential runs either, bringing in only 3.55% in 2012 and 9.34% in 2016.)

Also, consider the less egregious case of Laura Ebke. She was elected to the unicameral Nebraska legislature in 2014 with 50.4% of the vote. While this body is technically non-partisan, she was known to be a Republican. She left the GOP to join the LP in 2016. When she ran for re-election in 2018 while a member of the LP, she lost, garnering a respectable 43.6% of the vote in a losing effort. One could argue that simply being in the LP cost her 6.8% of the vote.

A number of high profile libertarian-leaning Republicans have held office, such as Ron Paul, Rand Paul, Mike Lee, Thomas Massie, and Justin Amash.\* (On the state level here in Missouri, we also have some: Tony Lovasco, Cody Smith, Dirk Deaton, and Phil Christofanelli. Forgive me if I missed some others.)

The dividing line between the GOP and the LP is famously porous. Ron Paul served two different times in Congress as a Republican, then ran for president in 1988 under the Libertarian ticket, but was then later elected to Congress (again) as a Republican. He also launched his 2008 and 2012 presidential bids as a Republican. Those 2008 and 2012 GOP runs probably brought more attention to libertarianism than every actual Libertarian Party presidential nominee before him combined.

The underwhelming Barr/Root Libertarian presidential ticket of 2008 was particularly curious; both candidates left the GOP to join the LP, lost the election (as LP candidates are wont to do), then went *back* to the GOP. The LP doesn't seem to miss either person very much—though Barr's mustache was undeniably dreamy.

"Original Libertarian" Bill Weld went from the GOP to the LP to serve as Gary Johnson's running mate in 2016, then went *back* to the GOP only to flame out quickly against incumbent President Trump in the 2020 primaries. (Excuse me while I play the world's smallest violin.)

Justin Amash\* went another direction, getting elected as a Republican but then joining the LP on his way out the door to give us our first sitting member of Congress.

The one thing all the elected candidates have in common is that they won as Republicans, not as Libertarians. Thus, one can make a solid argument that a libertarian-minded person is better off in the GOP if he/she is actually serious about winning public office. This comes with some considerable down sides, chief among them being the ugly business of having to hang out with actual mainstream Republicans and having to pledge fealty to Boss Trump.

Libertarian Republicans have their own caucus within the Republican Party, the Republican Liberty Caucus. Our very own Austin Petersen is a member of that group. So libertarians *do* have a seat at the GOP table, even if it may be at the policy-making equivalent of a kiddie table. A seat is a seat.

(If libertarians have any home in the Democratic Party, it's the equivalent of Catherine Martin's "home" in Buffalo Bill's basement.)

Then there are the libertarians, anarcho-capitalists, or flat-out anarchists who just sit things out altogether. I didn't used to understand these folks, but as I've gotten older, I get it. Their argument: by participating in an immoral system you are, in a way, *legitimizing it* and agreeing to accept the outcome. The temptation to bail out in such a system must be strong, especially if your chosen tribe routinely gets hammered at the polls. But are you bailing out because the system itself sucks, or just because the system won't elect your candidates? The former is more noble than the latter.

One of the great things about the Libertarian Party is that it has a very solid ideological foundation. The LP platform of 2020 isn't much different than the original 1972 platform. The Republican and Democrat platforms have evolved (or devolved) considerably during that same time, if the platforms aren't outright ignored, as the Republicans chose to do at their most recent giant pep rally.

The downside to this ideological consistency and purity is that we sometimes have little appeal to independent, moderate, or "swing" voters. The spineless fluidity of the two major parties' ideologies actually works to their advantage come election time; they can shapeshift into whatever the electorate wants them to be. Vague ideas of "conservative", "liberal", "right," and "left" don't scare people off as much as *very specific* policies about which government programs you're going to slash to the bone. (Hint: all of them.)

So if the LP doesn't actually win races, which is arguably the most important job of a political party, why does it exist? To quote Bob Slydell from *Office Space*: "What would you say...you do here?"

Do we exist primarily as a vehicle to spread the libertarian ideology? Do we exist as a particularly annoying debating society? Are we simply a permanent protest vote? Is it our goal to replace one of the two major parties someday? Are we hoping one party will adopt many of our beliefs, bringing us into the fold, and thus giving us no reason to go on as a party? (Historically, that is the most common fate of third parties in the United States.) Or, are we just masochists who kind of get off on the constant pain and misery? (As Albert Camus wrote of Sisyphus: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine [him] happy.")

I do not have the answers. What I *do* know is that if I was a left-handed lesbian albino midget Eskimo

and there just happened to be a political group out there called "The Left-Handed Lesbian Albino Midget Eskimo Party", I would feel strongly compelled to join them. Even if all we did was put the "miser(y)" in "commiserate."

(Can I still say "Eskimo?" Take it up with The Dead Milkmen in this case.)

The question of whether it is better to rule in Hell or serve in Heaven is one of several libertarian dilemmas. Most people would argue that the LP is Hell in that scenario; I'm not so sure. Maybe it's all Hell, and it's just time to drop off the grid and hunker down up in the hills.

We can argue all day whether the system *should* exist, and whether it *should* have the power over us that it does. But it *does* exist and it *does* have that power. That leaves the question of how best to fight it, and I'm still pretty sure the two major parties don't have a clue.