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By supporting Trumpism, the GOP is in danger of losing libertarian support

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A person walks with a U.S. flag past an outdoor news conference being held by the Washington State Patrol, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021, at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., on the day when President Joe Biden was inaugurated in Washington, D.C. The person, who declined to give his name, said he was a libertarian who doesn't agree with either President Joe Biden or former President Donald Trump, but felt it was important to be at the Capitol with his flag Wednesday despite the presence of heavy security. (Ted S. Warren)

The American right has been a coalition of libertarians and traditionalists, united against the common foe of a domineering and unaccountable government. Now the ties that bind are fraying. In the aftermath of the 2020 election, there is a real chance they could be severed entirely.

Rather than exhibiting self-reflection and admitting their role in allowing Trumpism to take over their party, some Republicans are instead blaming libertarians for their electoral defeat. But the libertarian rejection of Trump is not about one man. It is about the direction of American conservatism itself. Republicans may permanently lose the libertarian voting bloc if they fail to learn their lesson.

The libertarian problem is much bigger than Republicans realize. The official libertarian vote exceeded Biden's margin of victory in several key states. Furthermore, public opinion data shows that libertarians represent between 10% and 20% of the voting population, according to Cato Institute analysis. By demonizing libertarians, Republicans are shooting themselves in the foot.

Libertarians, a cantankerous and individualist bunch, do not share a coordinated electoral strategy. Rather, their political tactics have been a mixed bag of not voting, voting for the capital-L Libertarian Party with practically zero chance of success, or voting Republican. In the 2020 election, many libertarians declined to vote for Donald Trump. But some libertarians did something unprecedented: They voted Democratic.

What compelled libertarians to renounce the GOP? It certainly was not an endorsement of Joe Biden. While libertarians find Biden's platform on some issues promising, such as immigration, criminal justice and occupational licensing, they are also deeply concerned about the detrimental effects of regulation, taxation and a hike in the minimum wage on economic growth and prosperity.

Libertarians tended to reject Trump's open disregard for the Constitution, on full display as the ex-president desperately attempted to cling onto power. In truth, there were always worrying

signs about Trump, even before his exaggeration of the crowd size at his inauguration and his repeated suggestions that he would not accept the results of the election. Despite their revulsion toward Biden's economic policies, many libertarians saw the preservation of our constitutional republic, and the peaceful transfer of power, as far more important.

Furthermore, Trump snubbed core tenets of the Republican platform, which in past elections gave some libertarians enough justification to vote for GOP candidates. Trump, who oversaw a 40% increase in the national debt, was certainly no proponent of limited government. He also rejected free trade and open immigration. To many libertarians, this is unacceptable.

If the Republican party does not explicitly reject Trumpism and dismantle its remnants, they risk permanently losing the support of libertarians. In fact, if Democrats are savvy enough, they could actively court the libertarian vote. While often misconstrued as "far-right," libertarians are better understood as procedural moderates with a strong appreciation for both personal and economic freedom.

If Democrats embrace important libertarian concerns, such as criminal justice reform, drug legalization, ending cronyism, and ceasing foreign interventionism, they could have a real shot of persuading marginal libertarians. And if the left retreated from their destructive economic policies, so much the better. After all, if libertarians are partly responsible for Biden's victory, then the Democrats do not have the mandate they think they have for these policies.

Like it or not, libertarians have always been a crucial bulwark of postwar American right. Republicans ignored this and paid a high price. If they continue down the rabbit hole of Trumpism, they will further damage their coalition. Ironically, Republicans' attempt to rebrand may invite the very electoral destruction they sought to avoid.

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