

Liberals, libertarians and the liberaltarians

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For Neighbours

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What's a "libertarian?" It's a relatively new political movement attempting to find common ground between liberals and libertarians. If it's successful, it could have a dramatic effect in liberal, libertarian and conservative circles.

In December 2006, *The New Republic*, a liberal magazine, published an article entitled *Libertarians* by Brink Lindsey, vice-president of research at the libertarian Cato Institute. Lindsey claimed the U. S. conservative movement's "fusionist alliance" between traditionalists and libertarians was falling apart due to the former's shift from protecting "traditional values from the intrusion of big government" to a populist approach promoting "traditional values through the intrusion of big government."

According to a Cato study, *The Libertarian Vote*, libertarian-leaning Americans had already started to switch from the Republicans to Democrats. Lindsey identified some areas in the conservative camp that may have caused it: immigration, opposition to gay marriage, Hurricane Katrina, and the war in Iraq. In his view, the conservative movement's decision to latch onto these issues and others changed its philosophy and corrupted the GOP.

Lindsey believed a "refashioned liberalism that incorporated key libertarian concerns and insights could make possible a truly progressive politics once again--not progressive in the sense of hewing to a particular set of pre-existing left-wing commitments, but rather in the sense of attuning itself to the objective dynamics of U. S. social development."

Another Cato scholar, Will Wilkinson, takes a long-term approach in developing a liberaltarian, or "progressive fusionism," philosophy. He's working on what he calls the "liberal" project, which "would create the possibility of a popular political identity that takes the value of human liberty really seriously . . . this project involves an attempt to reunify the separate strands of the American liberal tradition."

Wilkinson seemingly has no interest in partisan politics. His ultimate goal is to create "an authentically liberal governing philosophy that understands that limited government, free markets, a culture of tolerance, and a sound social safety net are the best means to better lives."

The discussion about liberaltarianism has been interesting. Yet it would have been much more fascinating if Lindsey, Wilkinson and their merry band had all of their facts straight.

First, the GOP's political philosophy cannot be described as "conservative fusionism." I know this because I'm a fusionist. I'm one of the youngest followers of the late *National Review* senior editor Frank S. Meyer's unsuccessful attempt to find common ground between conservatism and libertarianism.

Meyer's fusionist vision built bridges between traditional conservatives and libertarians, aided by Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign and Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign, which still stand today. Unfortunately, fusionism never took off because the two camps could only agree to loosely work together. That's why the GOP is a conservative political party with libertarian and classical liberal leanings and not a fused outfit.

Second, a merger between modern liberals (who support big government and more social spending) and modern libertarians (who support limited government and less social spending) is next to impossible. Or, as political consultant Gerry Nicholls wrote, it "has about as much chance (of) happening as Rush Limbaugh has of being named Moveon.org's 'Man of the Year.' "

Yes, there was a historical link between liberals and libertarians in the 19th century. A number of prominent libertarians even used to call themselves liberals, including Milton Friedman. But that was then, and this is now. Lindsey and Wilkinson's position that both sides make unpopular concessions to find common ground is a long shot. Then again, stranger things have happened in politics. Stay tuned, folks.

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