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Frightened Republicans Try To Shut Down Election Competitors

Doug Bandow, Contributor OP/ED - October 22nd, 2012

The Republican Party claims to believe in freedom. But not really. Certainly not if that means being able to vote for someone who truly believes in liberty.

Former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson, a Republican who cut spending while advocating legalization of marijuana, originally ran for the GOP presidential nomination. But most of the debate organizers refused to let him join the largely undistinguished candidate herd which included another unknown former governor (Jon Huntsman) and a businessman with no political experience (Herman Cain).

Johnson switched parties and won the Libertarian Party nomination (joined by former Judge Jim Gray, the vice presidential nominee). Now Republicans fear the LP might take votes away from their candidate, Mitt Romney, who talks against spending and regulation. GOP operatives were able to keep Johnson off the Michigan ballot—after the LP filed the paperwork three minutes late. In Pennsylvania state Republican officials unsuccessfully challenged Johnson’s petition campaign (as elsewhere, the major party duopoly requires its competitors to collect signatures to go before the voters).

In the summer the Republican National Committee attempted to void Nevada’s law which offers a ballot option of “none of these candidates.” Republicans claimed they wanted to “bring clarity” to the election, but their real purpose was obvious: given the option of saying no to both major party representatives of Big Government, some citizens would be inclined to check “none.” In 1998 Sen. Harry Reid, the current majority leader, won reelection by 428 votes while more than 8000 Nevadans chose “none.” As the national challengers in 2012, the Republicans hoped these voters would migrate their way. Thankfully, the federal appellate court affirmed the law.

Obviously, the Republican Party is running scared. Reince Priebus, the national GOP chairman, dismissed Johnson as a “nonfactor.” But then why keep him out of intra-party debates and try to keep him off of the general election ballot? Because leading Republicans know that any citizen who really believes in limited government and individual liberty does not want to vote for either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney.

When a supporter of Rep. Ron Paul, the nation’s leading political libertarian and the LP’s standard-bearer in 1988, asked GOP vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan why

libertarians should vote Republican, the latter responded: “Do you want Barack Obama to be re-elected?” The obvious answer is no.

However, in the same situation Vice President Joe Biden could have responded similarly: “Do you want Mitt Romney to be elected?” And the answer equally would be no.

Both the Republican and the Democratic presidential candidates talk about liberty, freedom, fiscal responsibility, free enterprise, choice, and the Constitution. But neither candidate believes in those principles. Elect either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, and government will be bigger, spending will be higher, regulation will be more intrusive, the military will be fighting more wars, more service personnel will be dying, more money will be wasted abroad, civil liberties of more people will be violated, and more privacy of more citizens will be invaded. Overall, the free society will continue to retreat.

Advocates of the RepubliCrats are reduced to arguing that their guy is the lesser of two evils. Evil yes, just not as truly awful as the other guy.

Think of all the extra money Barack Obama would waste, say the Republicans. That argument sounded better before President George W. Bush and the GOP Congress went wild, running up the federal tab on virtually every program, even matching Lyndon Johnson’s spending increases for domestic discretionary spending. The budget was far safer during the 1990s, when a Democratic executive faced a Republican legislature.

Think of all the extra wars Mitt Romney would start, say the Democrats. That argument would be more convincing before President Barack Obama doubled down in Afghanistan, intervened in Libya, sent troops to Uganda, and threatened Iran with war. At least George W. Bush didn’t use slide shows to decide which American citizen to execute overseas. The country was far safer under Ronald Reagan, who only briefly employed military force three times during his presidency, and withdrew from Lebanon without attempting to “fix” that broken land.

The two leading candidates want to toss people in jail for smoking marijuana, even though the last three presidents and tens of millions of Americans have used the drug. Both contenders believe that presidents enjoy unaccountable autocratic powers if exercised in the name of “national security.” Both believe in the vast entitlement state with mass income transfers and redistribution.

Irrespective of the rhetoric, there isn’t much practical difference between the major parties. There might be a bit more than the “dime’s worth of difference” suggested by George Wallace. But probably not. After all, in his latest flips of many flops Romney continues to moderate his positions in a desperate ploy for votes: after the first presidential debate New York Times columnist David Brooks celebrated the return of “Moderate Mitt.” There should be real difference to vote for evil, even if slightly less than the other evil.

Today those who believe in individual liberty and limited government are essentially stuck choosing between a big-spending militaristic statist and a big-spending militaristic statist. Both are heading the same direction, even if they might reach various points more or less quickly. The differences are in degree, not kind. An alternative is desperately needed.

Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) provided one in Congress and the Republican Party presidential primaries, but he is retiring. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kty.) is more mainstream than his father, but still may come to offer “a choice, not an echo,” as supporters of Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) put it nearly a half century ago.

The Tea Party helps. The movement is complicated and internally inconsistent, but David Kirby and Emily Ekins of FreedomWorks and the Reason Foundation, respectively, reported in a recent Cato Institute study that “Roughly half the tea party is socially conservative, half libertarian—or, fiscally conservative, but socially moderate to liberal.” As a result of the movement’s focus on economic issues, they added, “Even social conservatives and evangelicals within the tea party act like libertarians.”

Finally, there are alternative political parties. The Constitution, Reform, and Green Parties all have advanced at least some issues in the cause of individual liberty and limited government. Most consistent, despite its often indifferent vote totals, is the Libertarian Party. In choosing Johnson and Gray the LP nominated two serious candidates who truly offer a choice rather than an echo.

Which triggered even more frenzied Republican attacks on the LP. This is the most important election in a generation (or is that millennium?), GOP apparatchiks proclaim, so any vote for anyone else is wasted. Of course, they said the same thing four years ago. And eight years ago. Alas, in those elections most Americans end up “wasting their votes” on the two RepubliCrat candidates dedicated to the failed status quo.

Despite claims of imminent Armageddon, the U.S. will survive whether Barack Obama (or Mitt Romney) is elected. Government will be bigger, people will be less free, the nation will be less prosperous, Americans will remain at war around the world. But life will go on. The only way to encourage real change is look beyond today’s political duopoly. The only way to elect someone who is not a big-spending militaristic statist is to allow someone who is not a big-spending militaristic statist on the ballot. And to vote for that someone.

Who is the right candidate for America? The American people soon will decide. But they should enjoy a full range of choices before deciding. Instead of manipulating the election rules in an attempt to eliminate competition, the Republican Party should welcome the Libertarian Party and other challengers in the political arena. The former should try to win by convincing the American people that the GOP really is the better option, not by preventing them from voting for someone else.