

<http://reason.com/archives/2010/07/21/where-do-libertarians-belong-p>

Where Do Libertarians Belong Politically?

Maybe nowhere

Brian Doherty | July 21, 2010

Reason's August-September cover story explored different answers to the question "Where Do Libertarians Belong?"

The answers, and a rich and interesting online debate they sparked, are, at the very least, interesting to those of us for whom skylarking about libertarian movement orientation and strategy is an entertaining consumption good. The Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey argued that a decisive and public split from the right is necessary for libertarians (without any longer calling for a full-blooded alliance with contemporary liberalism either); *National Review's* Jonah Goldberg countered that the right is the only significant political movement that agrees with libertarians full-heartedly about important economic liberty issues; and FreedomWorks' Matt Kibbe cheered the same Tea Party movement Lindsey decried, arguing that it encourages Hayekian and small-government constitutionalists whom libertarians ignore or mock to their detriment.

How important to the task of intelligently directing libertarian energies are such thoughts? From the beginnings of the self-conscious libertarian movement in the late 1940s, the overriding imperative was educating the public (including, but not limited to, policymakers, politicians, and political activists) in the ideas of libertarianism. It was about making more libertarians.

Contemplating the direction of policy and opinion in modern America would tell you that such education is still libertarians' most necessary task.

As Bryan Caplan, the George Mason University economist (who wrote in *Reason* back in 2007 about the many prevalent biases about economics that lead voters to prefer anti-free-market policies), has found in his studies of public opinion research vis à vis libertarian policy conclusions, "the sad truth is that the status quo is quite popular, and even moderate libertarian reforms like abolishing the minimum wage are persistently abhorrent to the overwhelming majority of the population."

At Caplan's advice, I spent some time trolling through the highly respected "General Social Survey" (GSS) to check out what Americans thought about more stringent applications of libertarian principles regarding when and where it is appropriate to bring state power to

bear. While the more abstractly phrased questions tended to produce some modestly libertarian results—for example, 75 percent of Americans favor or strongly favor government spending cuts in the abstract—when asked about any specific spending area, the public tended to want more spending.

Still, some encouraging signs do appear amongst the GSS data, especially in changes that have occurred over the past 10 years. For example, from 1996 to 2006, the number of those who believed in definitely allowing public meetings advocating revolution went up nearly 20 percentage points, while those who believed in definitely not allowing them went down 9 percentage points.

But around 50 percent of Americans apparently have no objection to government control of wages; only 28 percent believe racists should definitely be allowed to publish books; only 27 percent think it should definitely *not* be the government's role to provide jobs for all; and over 60 percent think government should prevent imports to protect the domestic economy.

We see a similar mistrust of robust libertarian ideas in electoral politics this season. While Kentucky Senate candidate Rand Paul's all-around libertarian bonafides are questionable—he's off a significant part of the libertarian reservation on immigration and overseas aggression—he is, for better or worse, the candidate most associated with the movement and its ideas this year. Self-styled libertarian wannabe Bill Maher, though, still mocks Paul as beyond-the-pale nuts for reasons both defensible on libertarian terms (Paul's defense of BP from presidential criticism) and not (Paul's freedom-of-association-based doubts about the Americans with Disabilities Act and aspects of the 1964 Civil Rights Act).

What Paul has gotten the most heat about, however, both in local Kentucky politics and the national scene (where the phrases "Rand Paul" and "insane" are oft found together) are his more purist libertarian stances on matters such as ending farm subsidies, ending federal support for local efforts to quash prescription drug "abuse," and his expression of a full freedom to associate (and not associate) stance on private discrimination.

A survey of modern politics, medium-term and short-term, shows that the most important question facing libertarians has little to do with where the movement should line up on this grim and hopeless landscape. We're facing massive expansions of government power and control of the health care and auto industries; uncontrollable spending as far as the eyes can see; and looming monetary and foreign policy disasters with no effective political pushback. Public employees bankrupting the public, artists arrested for the nature of their art, and the government demanding our children's urine: This is the nation we have chosen. It doesn't leave much room for libertarians, except on the outside screaming bloody murder.

Reason Contributing Editor Julian Sanchez sums up the best and most libertarian answer to the question of where the movement should aim its political energies: "Libertarian individuals and institutions should make whatever tactical alliances on specific issues that best suit their dispositions and concerns." And as a snarky commenter on his page,

Michael Drew, noted with some justice, when it comes to electoral coalition building, “nobody but you [libertarians] cares if you come aboard or not.”

Libertarians with a yen for a libertarianism that's as willing to ally with the left as it is with the right, such as Timothy Lee, are at best pointing to issues where libertarians agree with progressive policy intellectuals who are just as divorced from most actual Democratic politicians as pureblood libertarians are. That is, *all of us* who believe in real civil liberties, an end to the drug war, and an end to unconstitutional police tactics are pretty much out in the cold when it comes to electoral politics. In the Obama era, if you are seriously advocating limits on executive power and respect for the Fourth Amendment, you are about as politically relevant as someone advocating competing defense agencies.

That, and the general political fecklessness of a truly thorough libertarianism, will remain true until there are a lot more libertarians—*really* more libertarians, not merely the polled 13 percent or so who can be gathered under a loose rubric of “socially tolerant and fiscally conservative.” And that does not mean more fairweather libertarians who are unlikely to support, say, serious blows to the entitlement state, open borders, closed overseas military bases, or the elimination of public schools. Thanks to the existence of magazines, intellectuals, and institutions dedicated to explaining and advocating libertarian frameworks and solutions over the past 60 or so years, many, many more people embrace that libertarian vision than ever before. But there needs to be many more such libertarians before specific political alliances are the most important thing for libertarians to worry about.

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