

In the Tea Party Era, Should Libertarians Ditch the Right?

By *HEATHER HORN* | August 26, 2010 3:37pm



Between big-government Democrats and populist Republicans, where should libertarians look for allies? Reason magazine recently kicked off a debate on this subject by [hosting](#) three different opinions: one from the Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey, one from National Review's Jonah Goldberg, and one from Tea Party organization FreedomWorks's Matt Kibbe. Here's what they had to say and what others said in response.

- **No Home in the Republican Party** "All the contemporary right is good for," says [Brink Lindsey](#), "is checking at least some of the left's excesses, and thank goodness for that. But a clear-eyed look at conservatism as a whole reveals a political movement with no realistic potential for advancing individual freedom." He complains of the "raving, anti-intellectual populism ... brutish nationalism, anti-immigrant xenophobia ... and it's-always-1938-somewhere jingoism " as well as "extremism on beginning- and end-of-life issues. "He calls out the Tea Partiers in particular as holding "distinctly unlibertarian views," including an obsession with illegal immigration and an opposition to gay marriage. He doesn't think Democrats offer much either, and would prefer libertarians "[attempt] to claim the center of American politics," being "politically homeless" in this climate. His bottom line, though, appears to be that conservatives are not the natural libertarian allies even on economics:

But at least the Tea Partiers are dedicated to reining in government spending, right? After all, it's the movement's defining issue. Well, put me down as a skeptic. If you really care about restraining the growth of government, the number one priority has to be restructuring the budget-busting Medicare program. Yet during the health care debate the GOP sank to shameless demagoguery in defending Medicare's sanctity.

- **It Comes Down to Economics** "Like it or not," responds [Jonah Goldberg](#), "in America, the more libertarian you are on most economic questions, the more 'right wing' you are. Period." On the other hand, it's "not always true that being libertarian on social issues makes you 'left wing.'" He cites, for example, racial quotas. Goldberg thinks Lindsey spent a bit too much time "disparaging conservatives and aping the punditry of The New York Times."

- **Give the Tea Partiers Their Due**, adds [Matt Kibbe](#), unsurprisingly, who doesn't care for Lindsey's "dismissive" attitude: "This massive grassroots revolt against big government is the greatest opportunity that advocates of limited government have seen in generations, yet libertarian intellectuals like Lindsey seem content to sit on the sidelines and nitpick."
- **What Is the Point of This?** The Atlantic's [Clive Crook](#) finds himself confused by Lindsey's position when he steps back: "He repudiates conservatism so passionately that you suppose he would prefer libertarians to fuse with liberals. And of course one recalls that in 2006 he famously proposed a 'liberal-libertarian entente' in an article entitled '[Liberalarians](#)'." He's also not sure what Lindsey means by "'expressing libertarian ideas in the language of liberalism' ... (Your ideas are wrong but we like how you express them. Hmm.)." His summary of the situation:

Libertarians disagree with progressives about markets and with conservatives about "values", and that is really that. ... I cannot see what purpose is served by worrying about which of these unappeasable opponents would make the better partner

- **'Democrats Have Served Libertarians Poorly All Around,'** remarks [Veronique de Rugy](#) at National Review's The Corner, although she also thinks that "the libertarian ideal of small government has been poorly served by the Republican party." She wonders what libertarians accomplish in the long run, and points to a post by economics professor Scott Sumner as a possible answer.
- **How Libertarians Have Corrected Liberals** "Liberalitarianism is basically libertarians attempting to knock some sense into liberals on economic issues," declares [Scott Sumner](#). Here's a few issues, he says, with which it has worked:

1. In the US, they believed the prices of goods and services should be set by the government. Ditto for wages. ... 2. In the US, they believed the government should control entry to new industries. ... 3. They favored 90% tax rates on the rich. Today they favor rates closer to 50% on the rich. 4. In most countries liberals thought government should own large corporations. Today most liberals around the world think large enterprises should be privatized.

Sources

- [Where Do Libertarians Belong?](#) Reason
- [What Use Is a Libertarian?](#) Clive Crook, The Atlantic
- ['What Use Is a Libertarian?'](#) Veronique de Rugy, National Review
- [Success of Libertarianism](#) Scott Sumner, The Money Illusion

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