

The Volokh Conspiracy » More on Prospects for Liberalitarianism

Cato Institute scholar Brink Lindsey, a major [originator of “liberalitarianism.”](#) may have [given up on the idea](#). But not all libertarians have. [Julian Sanchez](#) and [Tim Lee](#) have both written interesting responses to [my recent post criticizing it](#). Sanchez argues that libertarians and liberals can cooperate with each other an issue-by-issue basis when they happen to agree, and also engage in a philosophical dialogue. Lee has a broader vision of potential left-libertarian collaboration.

I. Issue by Issue Cooperation.

In Sanchez’s view, “Libertarian individuals and institutions should make whatever tactical alliances on specific issues that best suit their dispositions and concerns.” On issues where we happen to agree with liberals, we should make tactical alliances with them. I don’t disagree with that. Indeed, I myself have noted areas of agreement with liberals such as [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Dennis Kucinich](#). To my knowledge, hardly any libertarian thinker disagrees with the idea of making whatever tactical alliances are likely to be effective in a given situation. Liberalitarianism, however, is more than that. At the very least, it calls for a strategic political alliance that cuts across a wide range of issues. In [Lindsey’s original formulation](#), it entails a broad philosophical fusion of the the two ideologies, a “new progressive fusionism.”

Sanchez also points to instances of issue-specific cooperation between liberals and libertarians and suggests that they refute my claim that there is little liberal interest in liberalitarianism. My claim, however, was not that liberals are opposed to any and all cooperation with libertarians, but rather that most have little or no interest in the sort of broader political alliance or philosophical fusion that liberalitarianism requires.

I also agree with Sanchez’s call for a dialogue between the two groups. However, that dialogue has already been taking place for many years. Libertarian scholars and intellectuals have been in constant dialogue with liberals and leftists since at least the days of Hayek’s debates with Keynes in the 1930s. Libertarians have devoted far more effort to understanding and analyzing left-wing ideas than conservative ones. That dialogue has produced many interesting arguments and ideas, and will no doubt produce more in the future. But it is unlikely to produce a political or philosophical coalition any time soon.

II. The “Liberalitarian Institute”: A Possible Program for Broader Cooperation?

In contrast to Sanchez, Tim Lee has a potential program for much broader liberalitarian cooperation. One might call it “the Liberalitarian Institute”:

In 2005, I was a founding employee of the Show-Me Institute, a “free market” think tank. What we meant by “free market” is that the organization devoted itself exclusively to those issues where conservatives and libertarians agreed. We wrote about taxes, school choice, property rights, health care policy, and so forth. We had an explicit policy that we didn’t do work on “social issues,” which in practice meant any issue where libertarians sided with liberals....

And the Show-Me Institute is hardly unique. There’s a nationwide network of think tanks called the State Policy Network, with member organizations in almost every state, that are built on this same premise....

Crucially, the basis of the alliance isn’t that libertarians and conservatives agreed on some kind of compromise position on “social issues,” we just didn’t talk about them on the job. And this works remarkably well. When you work at a “free-market think tank,” you pretty quickly get used to the fact that tax policy is on the agenda and gay rights are not....

So conceptually speaking, it wouldn’t be hard to create a liberalitarian movement. All you’d have to do is create a mirror image of the “free market” think tanks. Hire people like [Radley Balko](#) and [Glenn Greenwald](#). Pay them to write about all the issues that “free market” think tanks don’t: foreign policy, civil liberties, gay rights, the drug war, immigration, torture, the death penalty, and so forth. Don’t hire anyone to write about taxes, school choice, guns, or other topics where libertarians and liberals have strong disagreements.

If you build a Liberalitarian Institute, Lee suggests, they will come!

There are at least two major problems with Lee’s idea. First, many libertarian organizations do in fact devote a lot of time and effort to issues such as drug legalization, immigration, and criminal justice where we agree more with liberals than conservatives. The Cato Institute — the most prominent libertarian think tank, and *Reason*, the most prominent libertarian publication — are excellent examples.

Even some of the organizations Lee lists as focusing exclusively on on libertarian-conservative issues are more complex than he thinks. To take just one case that I happen to be familiar with, Lee claims that the Institute for Justice is “is a libertarian law firm that focuses almost entirely on issues where libertarians and the ACLU disagree.” In reality, many of IJ’s clients are poor and minorities who have been victimized by various government regulations and property rights violations. *Kelo v. City of New London*, IJ’s most famous case, [attracted a great deal of liberal support](#). When I wrote IJ’s amicus brief in [a previous major property rights case](#), we successfully solicited one from the ACLU on the same side. IJ also advocates many legal theories (e.g. — [reviving the Privileges and Immunities Clause](#)) that annoy judicial conservatives, and deliberately avoids the issue of affirmative action so as not to alienate potential liberal and minority supporters.

These and other libertarian efforts at outreach to the left have produced some useful cooperation on individual issues. But it is significant that they haven’t produced anything approaching a broad alliance.

Second, the range of issues where libertarians and liberals genuinely agree is narrower than Lee assumes. Most liberals do not in fact agree with libertarians on civil liberties, the war on drugs, and gay rights. Certainly, both groups decry many conservative policies on these issues. But they don't really agree on the alternatives to them. On civil liberties, for example, many liberals favor hate speech laws, restrictions on political speech by corporations, wide-ranging [sexual harrasment laws that infringe on freedom of speech](#), and so forth. On gay rights, libertarians favor laissez-faire, while liberals tend to favor antidiscrimination laws that restrict the freedom of private organizations. On the War on Drugs, only a minority of liberals favor anything close to the full-blown legalization advocated by libertarians. Foreign policy, of course, is an issue that divides both liberals and [libertarians](#) among themselves.

The conservative-libertarian free market think tanks Lee points to succeed because the conservatives and libertarians there agree not only on rejecting liberal economic policies but also on an affirmative agenda of severely restricting government's role in the economy. It would be much more difficult to run an economic policy think tank that brought together libertarians with ["compassionate conservatives"](#) who want to replace liberal economic interventions with conservative ones.

None of this precludes tactical alliances between liberals and libertarians on particular issues. But it does make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create the sort of broader "liberalitarian movement" that Lee advocates.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to reject Lee's idea for a liberalitarian think tank out of hand. Let's try it and see. If you're a left-leaning libertarian or libertarian-leaning liberal with a lot of money on your hands, I urge you to fund Lee's suggestion. Establish the Liberalitarian Institute and hire someone like Lee as its president. I fear that the project won't work because of the sorts of problems discussed above. But if it did succeed, it could potentially make a valuable contribution to public debate.