

What Can the Libertarian Party Accomplish?

Donald Silberberger

April 25, 2014

Abstract

Since its founding in 1972, the Libertarian Party has been running, for high office, candidates none of whom could realistically expect that they would be elected to those offices. Are there legitimate reasonable purposes towards which the LP should mount admittedly doomed electoral efforts? How might the LP's expensive campaigns be optimized for successful progress towards achieving these purposes?

1 Preamble

Since the founding in 1972 of the Libertarian Party, its frequently stated official goal has been “to nominate and elect Libertarians to office”.

After 42 years, reasonable folks acknowledge that the LP has failed to elect anybody to significant public office — has failed so badly that the LP counts a candidate successful if that candidate attains 5% of the popular vote. This deceptional or delusional interpretation of electoral results has deleterious consequences for the LP and for the people who drift into its membership roll... and then eventually out again. I claim that the LP's grandiosity amid abysmal failures is detrimental to the progress of the libertarian movement itself, inducing disillusionment and skepticism, and inviting confusion about our underlying ethical values.

As I see it, our movement rides upon such values. While LPers may disagree on many matters, overwhelmingly Libertarians concur in the ethic to which I allude. I hold that our shared ethic is this:

Live and let live. Don't do to another what you wouldn't want done to you; don't support hirelings who do it. Do not follow a multitude to do evil. Start no fights. Don't cast the first stone. If you harm an innocent then compensate the harmed. Respect personal property rights, and respect the commons. That is to say, the goal sought by every libertarian, qua libertarian, is that of responsible individual liberty for everybody.

This value system implies tacit social agreements among people. Among these is the expectation that I will allow you to behave outrageously; in reciprocity you will permit me my unconventionalities. The main proviso is that nobody's property or rights or safety, etc., will be infringed by another's actions. I.e., I will not persecute you for your being “different”; likewise, you will tolerate my own harmless peculiarities.

Our political collaboration as libertarians depends upon our shared antipathy for people and institutions that empower bigotry, and upon our consequent joint opposition to bigotries expressed in law and custom.

Recalling George Washington's admonition that “... *government is not reason, it is force.*...”, most LPers visualize libertarian society as one where governmental power is diminished to a minimum far below what is evidenced in the United States today. For me, that is a route toward, but is not invariably required, for libertarianism's realization. For instance, I believe that federal force was appropriately deployed during the height of the civil rights movement in Dixie. (Some LPers may disagree with me here.)

The majority of my fellow LPers deplore all taxes, of whatever sort and directed towards whatever purpose. I myself have never been troubled by my taxes, albeit extracted from me by (implicit) force, and although I am mindful of the maxim, “*Taxation is theft.*” My mindless reaction has long been to regard my “net” on my paychecks as my actual salary, ignoring the amounts chiselled from my mythological “gross salary”. Less mindlessly, I do not regret that workers are being paid, at my expense, for the construction and maintenance of our nation's infrastructure, which of course I use and upon which I blithely rely. And I hope that some of the resources “stolen from me” via taxation are efficiently devoted to preserving the commons and to arranging for my and my family's protection against potential large scale aggression from abroad.

If some of that money pilfered from my gross salary pays for the real needs of the impoverished, then I will not take umbrage. It is of benefit to my peace of mind not to be assailed on the street by beggars of the sort I have encountered in other countries and now, increasingly, in my own. I am happy that some entity is taking our less fortunate brethren into account. Although I do volunteer my personal resources for sufferers whom I know, I must accept the fact that I don't know everybody who may benefit from human assistance. Some are noticed by nobody at all, until the aroma of cadaverine announces them.

Unlike Ayn Rand's, my own libertarianism does not require me to ignore the sick and hungry among us.

I am relieved also at the reliable absence both of cyanide in my purchased comestibles and of cholera in my drinking water. Government does strive to extend its powers beyond those granted it in our sundry constitutional documents. Usually this must be fought. But some such cases of overextension have merit.

And yet, I claim I am a libertarian, writing to reach out to other libertarians, and asking them to reconsider the prudence of the strategies persistent in our Libertarian Party. I joined the LP in January of 1991, shortly after discovering its existence. But I have long held basically libertarian values... even while in Seattle circa 1959 I hobnobbed with Young Socialists. Many of those other "young socialists" were libertarians too; like me, they hadn't yet gained insight into their correct political self-designation.

Finally, I am unimpressed by allegations of personal "independence" from a few of my compatriots; I prefer less bravado. Not many of us would have survived alone this February as naked independent souls in the Adirondack forest, without the multitudinous gifts bestowed on all by millenia of culture and technology: all of these gifts contributed by countless other people to our tool kits, skill sets, comfort, and well being.

2 Forty Two Years Already

The industrious and dedicated current Executive Director of the National Libertarian Party has written a book in which he asserts that the purpose of the LP is to nominate and elect Libertarians to office where they can bend our country's legal framework into a more libertarian shape. I have no wish to undermine this exemplary person, but I believe it is time to challenge his restatement of tradition-honored LP aims.

While I agree that it is desirable for libertarians to offer themselves under the LP banner as candidates for public office, I have long questioned the insistence that it is our job actually to elect LPers to office. Furthermore, I believe we should stop harping on our vote totals, and we surely should stop making the maximization of those vote totals a high priority for determining our campaign strategies.

I propose four alternative targets towards which the strategizing sharpshooters in the LP should aim:

#1. Each LP candidate should pick a few concrete issues illustrative of libertarian values – usefully raising for discussion pollster-rejected questions which "major party" candidates cannot mention, given that they can rationally hope to win the elective offices they seek. However, LP candidates, being unelectable, have no reason to stick to polls-tested, media endorsed, hot button issues. It is largely the fear that "third party" candidates will raise embarrassing questions that induces the duopoly to block us "thirds" out of their silly "debates".

#2. An LP candidate should want to run for office mainly to advance public consciousness about his/her chosen issue(s). LP candidates ought not choose issues just in order to "sell themselves" to the electorate. LP issues should not be mere embellishments of its campaigns. We should care and think about our issues.

#3. The LP should arrange vigorous real debates, for instance via Free & Equal, with its principled "foes", chiefly these days with the Green Party, which finds itself powerless in the United States in the same way that the Libertarian Party is powerless. Such debates seem likely to prove more interesting as public spectacles than are the mock-debate beauty contests staged by the "major" (i.e., political-employment-agency) parties.

#4. The LP should attract libertarians as LP members, individuals who are energetic and passionate. I believe the foregoing three approaches will augment the quality, if not the quantity, of the LP's membership.

Except for a few very minor and uninfluential elections, none of the branches of the LP have succeeded in electing people specified as its candidates to any significant office. We have been trying for 42 years to win any sort of office somewhere, anywhere, and on the few occasions that we elect maybe a town trustee here, a mayor of a little burg there, we are sure to receive fundraising letters from the LP which tout those victories as harbingers of a glorious libertarian future. If only the LP had more money, what wonders it would perform upon the somnolent, although presumably liberty-loving, electorate! At least this is what the fundraising teams always insinuate. Our naifs get told we'll eventually win serious elections. Naturally we continue not to win any such elections. Our naifs, no longer naive, quit the LP in disgust and despair.

Of course money helps. Here in NYState, the LPNY periodically duns its otherwise mainly inactive members to hire professional petition carriers, praying that thus we will get the 25K nominating petition signatures periodically needed to ensure that the word 'Libertarian' and the LPNY's candidates' names, are printed on the NYState ballot. The LPNY collects barely enough money for this purpose alone. Almost no funds remain for actual campaign activity; i.e., for promulgating an unmistakeable libertarian message.

Yes, money helps. If the LP had a few tens of millions to spend on its candidates' campaign efforts, then we too might contend as an employment agency party. Of course, in the process, then we too, like the Demopublicans and Republicrats, would have sold ourselves to the highest bidder.

If, on the other hand, we ceased our mimicry of the "major" parties then we might attract enough of the right sorts of members – people motivated by rage love and rational determination – to carry petitions that will get articulate and passionate spokespeople on the ballot... without our having to resort to paid petition carriers, many of whom despise our cause and will not present it. And, if we were also clear that high vote totals are low among our priorities, and state our alternative priorities lucidly and often, then we might find a larger percentage of LP members who stick with the LP, and work towards creating a society that thinks libertarian thoughts. The enacting of legislation we desire – the sort engineered to make sense pragmatically as well as ideologically – then might, at long last, get an excellent chance to be realized.

I believe it would work like this:

First, we aim to promote positions on concrete issues clustering logically and morally around libertarian ideas of the sort listed in the third paragraph of my Preamble. These positions are basic to many of the world's religions, as well as to ethical and humane atheists and agnostics. They need only to be uttered to find acceptance by our fellow citizens. We should emphasize how LP ideology crystallizes about those values.

Second, the LP's public statements, echoed repeatedly in those of its candidates, will broadcast and argue for reasoned libertarian positions on those few specific issues we have chosen to bruit and to repeat often.

Third, the LP's advertised ideas will induce a number of focused interest groups to arise in order to promote action on matters whose public discussion the LP has initiated. Those groups will marshal tens of thousands of sympathizers, most of whom may never come to see themselves as libertarians, but who will vigorously promote the special causes which we in the LP have brought to light.

Fourth, public opinion is thus influenced to change on these issues. For instance, pointless deployment of American armed forces comes into serious question; the war on drugs gets some sand under its skis; the horrors of the excessive American gulag come under dispute; the ubiquity and menace of unrestrained mass surveillance gets topical; currency manipulation comes under increasing scrutiny; the rights of all individuals to be individuals in their own right, whatever their race, gender, sexual orientation, etc, slowly become increasingly respected; the death penalty and torture come under hostile fire; and reproductive choice is now an apparently permanent reality, despite the tolerated presence in our midst of self-styled "libertarians for life" (whom I consider misled). Most of these are in fact LP victories. The LP should vociferously lay claim to these victories, because we in fact have been often the first on the battlefield of the disputes entailed.

Fifth and, with lengthy delay, last: Legislation of the sort we can approve gets passed into law. Political and societal improvements finally occur.

We will continue never electing an LP President, since we are not, after all, a political jobs employment agency. Our purpose is obligatorily different from that of an employment agency. A slight change of claims about our LP may cleanse away the mocking apparent futility of our high profile campaigns, by shedding candid illumination upon our motives for our campaigns – perhaps recasting most of them as informal referenda on selected issues, radical ones if we can take a little heat for ten years during which we will be deemed lunatics or worse. Ultimately, short term victories, won by power and wealth and dogged tradition, will crumble under the conjoined onslaughts of ideas linked to basic moral urgency. If our positions embody ideals that spring up from ideas rooted in basic moral urgency then eventual societal improvements will result – even if we, the instigators, will be reviled for our ideas before those ideas triumph.

The socialist movement of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries never elected its candidates to significant office. It didn't need to elect them. When that scion of an aristocratic upstate NY family, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat (not a Socialist), became President, much of the socialist movement's program was enacted into law. FDR's New Deal embodies many of the more rational parts of the Socialist Party's aims.

We libertarians too could win this sort of game... if we concentrate on playing the game intelligently.

The Libertarian Party was founded 42 years ago. It has sponsored and supported many LP candidacies, but has enjoyed only negligible electoral success. However, it has never needed electoral success in order to advance its deeper goal: the promotion of responsible individual liberty in American society.

For 42 years the LP has wasted much of its meager resources in pretending to be what it is not. It has wasted opportunities to transmit an unmistakable notion of what responsible individual liberty means.

I ask only that our Libertarian Party begin to focus away from the foolish pretence that it is, or can be without giving up its soul, a political employment agency like the Republicans and the Democrats. Upon relinquishing that sort of nonsense, the LP will free itself to more effectively and efficiently promote specific beneficial libertarian societal changes that the LP would thus have augmented its potential to achieve.

Our role should be to engender the ideas and to publicize them in our campaigns. It is for others, more powerful than we, to transmute those ideas into law and ultimately into accepted custom.