

Announcing: The Libertarian Reform Caucus

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For my past few columns I have been criticizing the Libertarian Party platform. In summary, I have stated that the platform is too radical for prime time. Whenever a likeable, moderate Libertarian candidate gets traction, the opposition party publishes a few zingers from the LP platform. Defeat of our candidate is then assured.

As I stated in “It’s the Message,” no matter how much we improve the Libertarian Party as an organization, real victory will elude us until we put forth a salable message. You can raise millions of dollars and have activists walking every precinct and still lose—and lose badly—if the voters dislike your message.

Well, the time has come to do something about this. America desperately needs a *real* libertarian party; that is, a libertarian party with the right balance of idealism and practicality. We need freedom lovers to run for office *and win*. It is time to turn back the tide of tyranny in our great country. Waiting for our nation to collapse under the weight of big government is not acceptable.

To this end, I, and others of like mind, have launched the Libertarian Reform Caucus (www.ReformTheLP.org). This caucus is open to all who agree with the following Statement of Purpose:

Statement of Purpose

We, the members of the Libertarian Reform Caucus believe that America needs a real libertarian party, a party that promotes liberty while being conscious of political reality, a party designed to win elections and begin rolling back excess government *now*. In particular, the party needs:

- A platform that proposes a realistic vision for the next few years, as opposed to an idealistic vision of a libertarian future. The public expects a party platform to show what a party's candidates intend to do during the next term of office. If the party wants a long term vision statement, it should be in a separate document labeled as such.
- A platform that unites libertarians rather than dividing them. Where libertarians disagree, the platform should be silent. The party should be a tool for all libertarians.
- A platform based on the realization that there are other important values in addition to the non-initiation of force. Freedom is extremely valuable, but it is not the only value.

Allow me to expand on these words a bit. The prolog talks about a real political party. A real political party is one that seriously intends to win elections and is willing to do what it takes to do so. Educating the public is a secondary function for a real political party. A real political party listens to the public. It takes polls. It tailors its message to what the public is ready to accept. It is willing to drop or defer ideas that the public currently finds unacceptable, in order to implement those ideas for which the public is ready.

I know this may sound horribly unprincipled to some, but this is political reality. Politics is a game of majorities, not saints. A party that puts forth ideas that don’t have at least passive

acceptance by at least half the population in some political districts is doomed to fail. Question: which is more principled, putting forth a plan that is “perfect” yet doomed to fail, or *accomplishing* something good? (See my previous essay, “Is Gradualism a Contradiction?” for a more complete argument.)

But I did say real *libertarian* party. While there are few districts with a majority willing to support the current LP platform in one gigantic swallow, there are many districts which could support officeholders who are far more libertarian than those the voters in said districts currently send to the houses of government. These districts just need a party to put such candidates on the ballot and support them.

As I have stated in one of my earliest columns, we do not need libertarian takeover of any legislature in order to turn the tide. We only need to outnumber the authoritarians. While an extremist libertarian party can barely win *any* partisan elections, it is not necessary to water down the platform down to the 50% libertarian percentile. It is only necessary to mellow out to the point where we can get majority acceptance in 10-20% of the nation’s political districts. This leaves plenty of room for to push the envelope, to take “edgy,” unconventional positions.

So how should the platform be improved? How can we increase acceptance and support the most with the least amount of compromise? The three bullet points in the Statement of Purpose give ways to do this.

First, note that the current platform is a statement of what current party members consider to be the ideal government, or lack thereof. It is not a statement of where they think the country can be in a few years. Walk around the convention floor and point to some of the more radical planks and most delegates will admit that those planks would take years, or even generations to implement. A classic example would be immigration: most delegates I have talked to recognize that the welfare state needs to be fixed before we should open the borders wide.

But this is not how the public defines the phrase “political platform.” The public assumes that a political platform is a statement of what the party’s current slate of candidates intends to accomplish. In other words, the platform is understood to mean a plan for the next term of office: 2-6 years, depending on office. Since most attention is on presidential races, the common understanding is 4 years.

In other words, a U.S. political party’s platform had best reflect a four year time horizon. By mixing long term visions into the platform, we send a message that is more radical than intended! We Big-L Libertarians are radical enough! We do not need to exaggerate to the public how radical we are! The current platform is tantamount to an unnecessary self-sabotage! As a party, we need to think about *how* we are going to untangle the mess the Demopublicans have created—with a minimal amount of negative disruption. We should then put forth to the public the *first* steps in this plan.

There is another problem: not all libertarians agree on what the ideal should be. There are several points of very serious disagreement, even between people who absolutely agree on the non-initiation of force principle. Abortion is a classic example. Is an embryo human? If so, abortion is murder. If not, abortion is like a haircut or a tattoo. These questions are scientific, not philosophical. They are inputs into which we apply our non-aggression axiom. Principled libertarians can disagree vehemently on this one.

The second bullet point answers problems such as this. Where principled libertarians strongly disagree, the platform should be quiet, or even silent. The libertarian movement is small enough as it is; we do not need a party that represents only part of the movement!

Just because the party as a whole should be quiet/silent on certain issues, does not mean individual Libertarians should be. For example, people like Ron Paul could be stridently pro-life while others could be pro-choice. The party platform should represent the intersection of the various flavors of libertarian thought, the points where most libertarians agree.

Perhaps the second biggest area of disagreement within the broader libertarian movement is that of defense and foreign policy. As a practical matter, is it prudent to allow madmen to own nukes? Should we wait until nuked by a madman before acting? Is it riskier to wait and allow problems to fester, or is it riskier to create enemies while acting preemptively? These are tough scientific questions on which people can disagree strongly despite holding the same moral philosophy.

Speaking of moral philosophy, is it more immoral to levy taxes to support warfare against a genocidal government or to sit by while millions of innocents are slaughtered? Principled libertarians can disagree! Part of the disagreement stems from difficult scientific questions over the costs and benefits of foreign intervention. Internal genocide is pretty horrible, but foreign invasion isn't pretty, either. Isolationists can point to many unproductive examples of U.S. intervention. Interventionists can point to a few important successes. *Both* can be libertarians. (In a future essay I will try to point out some possible areas of common ground between these two camps.)

The fact that the LP has come down so strongly on one side of this debate has isolated it from some of this country's most prominent libertarian figures. At the last convention there were calls to prevent Neal Boortz from speaking because of his stance on foreign policy. Mr. Boortz has done more to promote the party than just about anyone, and many party members wanted to kick him out! Another example: one time when Walter Williams was hosting Rush Limbaugh's show, a caller asked Williams if he was a Libertarian. Williams' answer was that he considered the LP's defense policy to be dangerous to the safety of this country. (I personally agree with him; the world has grown considerably smaller since 1790.)

And finally, the third bullet point: non-initiation of force is a very important moral value, but it is not the *only* moral value. There are other factors worthy of consideration, such as the plight of the poor, protecting endangered species, etc. Utilitarians in the audience may argue that these values will be taken care of in a truly libertarian society, and they may be right. But between where we are and where we want to be are many intermediate states. Many of the existing government programs exist to ameliorate harms caused by other government programs. The order in which we dismantle unnecessary government programs is important.

Do we get rid of anti-trust law before we fix the securities laws that stifle competition? Do we cut welfare benefits before we simplify the tax code and deregulate the labor market in order to create more/better jobs? Do we cut taxes before we pay down the national debt and take care of those already dependent on Social Security?

These are issues worthy of consideration and debate. Where there is consensus, these considerations should show up in the platform. Where there is division, the platform should be silent and individual candidates should take their own positions.

The Plan of Action

So what is this caucus and how does it actually plan to fix the LP platform?

Well, for starters the caucus is a web site. But it is not a mere weblog stating the opinions of a few reformers. No, the plan is to solicit platform ideas from a wide array of viewpoints that still fall within the broad boundaries of the Statement of Purpose.

Here is the important point: these platform ideas are *not* the official view of the caucus. Instead, the view of the caucus is reflected in the votes on these proposals by those who have joined the caucus. In order to build the optimum consensus, we are doing preference voting for platform proposals: members are encouraged to vote for *all* of the options that they would support. The caucus will then promote those proposals that have a strong consensus within the caucus. (Hey, this might be a better way for the Libertarian Party to generate its platform instead of the gamesmanship of parliamentary politics!)

While fixing the platform is our primary focus, there are other areas of improvement for the Libertarian Party, such as organizational matters, membership criteria, optimum strategy, etc. The www.ReformTheLP.org web site also has space for essays on these matters. Once again, these essays are not the official view of the caucus. The caucus states its opinions by the membership rating each essay on a 1-5 scale.

Who We Are

We are libertarians who want to build liberty in this country *now*. We are libertarians who are unwilling to wait until society collapses in order to pick up the pieces. Other than that, we have a broad range of opinion. The caucus includes:

- Moderate libertarians, obviously.
- Radical libertarians who realize that to cut government a lot, you must first cut it a little.
- Anarcho-capitalists who realize that to eliminate government you must first cut it.

In other words, you do not have to be a moderate libertarian to join the caucus, and you shouldn't have to be a radical libertarian to join the Libertarian Party. The caucus and the party should be about *increasing* liberty *now*. After liberty gets increased, some moderate libertarians may decide that they have enough liberty and leave the party. Meanwhile, other moderates may decide they really like liberty and want even more. Philosophical debate over the ultimate optimum size of government is a good excuse to drink beer but should not be the overriding factor in running a political party.

Notice also that I spelled "libertarian" with a small "l." This is intentional. There are many small-l libertarians who would support the party *if* the party was serious about winning elections. We are out to recruit them. There other small-l libertarians who avoid the party because the party takes strong positions in areas where the broader libertarian movement is divided. We are out to recruit them as well.

To some degree we are modeled on the Free State Project: start with a broad concept (take over a small state/fix the party), build a consensus on the specifics (choose a state/choose a better platform), and then encourage greater commitment *if* success looks possible (20,000 members/enough members to affect the convention). In our case we have no formal threshold for commitment to join/rejoin the Libertarian Party, but we do ask members to state their intentions in this regard for statistical purposes.

If all goes well, www.ReformTheLP.org may turn out to be the biggest Libertarian Party recruitment drive since Project Archimedes.

The question remains as to whether existing members will be happy with the results.