

# Less Thinking, More Drinking

*By Carl S. Milsted, Jr.*

“We’re a political party, not a debating society!” “We’re a political party, not an educational foundation!” “We’re a political party, not a political lobby!” “We’re a political party, not a social club!”

If you’ve been in the Libertarian Party for a while, you have probably heard at least one of the above slogans, perhaps all of them. These slogans do make an important point, but, literally speaking, they are all wrong.

Let’s go back a few steps. Long time readers will recall that I have stated that to grow, the LP must create value to freedom lovers *now*, as opposed to in some far off blue sky future that never seems to come. This was Bottleneck C (Credibility) in my previous essay “Mass Producing Libertarians.” As one step towards widening this bottleneck, I advocated that we de-emphasize presidential and statewide elections and focus on the most attainable legislative seats – generally the lower state house seats, but this could be U.S. Congress for the bigger states. Each Libertarian elected to a legislature is valuable to freedom lovers, long before we take over a legislature. Indeed, these legislators are valuable even if we *never* take over any legislature.

But here comes the problem: few if any local affiliates have the resources to win a legislative seat in a state house. Barring wealthy candidates or donors, the only way to win at this level is to focus resources on a limited number of promising candidates. Alas, many Libertarians find such an approach unsatisfying, and are unwilling to donate to candidates for whom they are unable to vote for personally. Also, in order to have promising candidates to focus resources on, we need to build up local affiliates by means other than local victory.

For advocates of the slogans quoted above, the answer is obvious: small affiliates should run candidates for tiny offices, such as School Board, Soil and Water Commissioner, Weigher of the Coal and so forth. There are good party-building reasons for doing this; candidates gain experience without throwing away their credibility, important contacts are made with the press and local leaders, and more. The problem once again is that it is difficult to get libertarians enthusiastic about such races. It is hard to apply libertarian principles to giving out federal largess or running a public school. I am one of those unenthusiastic libertarians and I have had the opportunity to hear some very powerful, indeed hair-raising, arguments in favor of such races from Don Gorman over a few beers. Most libertarians have not had this opportunity. Winning in dog-catcher level races does little to the credibility bottleneck.

Another approach is to run higher up, but still without hope of victory. These races are considered practice races. The goal here is often to beat previous vote totals for the same level of race. Often this entails a strategy of focusing resources in a few precincts to prove we have the capability to win if we were to have the resources. Once again, this approach fails to widen the credibility bottleneck.

Let me state the problem starkly: *To widen the credibility bottleneck, the Libertarian Party must perform services that are valuable to libertarians -- services that have value even if the Libertarian Party were to subsequently disappear.* Putting Libertarians in dog-catcher positions may be valuable to the party, but it is not valuable to libertarians in general. Having a Libertarian score 7% in a three-way race instead of 4% may bring cheers to those already committed to the party, but this is no value to libertarians in general. Libertarian *victory* in positions of real power – state house, sheriff, town council, prosecutor, judge – *is* valuable to all libertarians, even those who currently hold no hope for the LP.

But such victories are hard to come by for small local affiliates trying to get off the ground. To get growth towards having the size to achieve victory, small local affiliates (which is most) should focus on providing other things of value to libertarians.

### ***Not an Educational Foundation?***

That hopeless race for state house or U.S. Congress can still provide a service of value to libertarians. Radio spots, TV spots, direct mail, literature drops, and meet the candidate events can all be used to educate the public on libertarian principles. This is valuable to freedom lovers *now*, even without the expectation that such educational efforts will eventually lead to Libertarian victories.

Some might argue that such efforts are better done by other organizations than a political party. True, such organizations can often claim tax deductibility and they do not have to go through quite as many finance reporting hoops. However, political campaigns have an excuse to do lit drops. Political campaigns get the cheapest advertising rates. Political campaigns are immune from some forms of censorship that other organizations face. And if they are a bit credible, political campaigns also get a fair amount of free media.

A campaign that does a literature drop pointing out the similarities between Communism and American public schools performs a service for home school, and private school advocates – even if that campaign has no chance of victory. A campaign can run TV ads attacking the tobacco lawsuit that no tobacco company could dare run, much as they might like to. And they can run the ads using the political rates at that.

Note that an educational strategy race would be run differently than many LP paper and cardboard campaigns. Brochures would be about one issue and why, vs. the candidate's catalog of issues. The LP brand would be emphasized over the candidate's name recognition. Yard signs would be issue signs. Bumper stickers would be issue bumper stickers.

A reminder: the main benefit for the LP of such educational campaigning is *not* to gain LP members by converting people who are not currently libertarian. The main benefit is gaining the support of existing libertarians and single-issue fellow travelers by performing the service of bringing in converts on a few issues.

### ***Not a Lobby?***

Why not? Just because there are no Libertarians that are allowed to vote at a city council meeting or a legislative session it does not mean Libertarians cannot attend and speak at such events. There are plenty of non-voting authoritarians and remoras at such meetings advocating tyranny and largesse. A few hot-headed Libertarians can provide balance.

Keep in mind that many lawmakers are uncommitted and/or spineless. They will vote which way the wind blows. So be blowhards. As a bonus, you will get plenty of press coverage.

Many times such lobbying efforts will fail. Sometimes such failures are accompanied by temper tantrums of the statist against which you argue. This can be very satisfying in and of itself – much more fun to volunteers than doing petitioning drives.

### ***Not a Debating Society?***

Why not? Many libertarians love to debate the finer points of their philosophy. Providing a debating society is a value to them.

Once you get them in the same room, you can then hit them up for money to do real politics. Or maybe get them out to protest the latest abomination going on at city hall. Debates can also be used to groom future candidates.

### ***Less Thinking, More Drinking***

The social club aspect of the Libertarian Party should extend beyond being a debating society. Not all freedom lovers are philosophical nerds. Cheap food and cheap drinks should be the order of the day. Discuss the latest statist atrocity over a pool table.

There is nothing quite like winding down over drinks with people with whom you have experienced adversity. There is a bond developed that works even with those who wallflowers by nature. This is the power behind both fraternity hazing and social clubs that do charitable work. Petitioning and door-knocking may not quite be up to the level of true hazing, but they come rather close.

Community is valuable to everyone. A shared community of libertarians that is fun to be in will grow to the point that it can do real politics.

This is reality, not mere hypothesis. I have had the pleasure of watching this growth here in Buncombe County. Indeed, I moved to Buncombe County partly because of the social club atmosphere generated by the local LP. Even non-libertarians have shown up to our socials to enjoy the conversation. And it is impressive how much money can be raised by asking for small donations around the table on a weekly basis. A buck a week is 52 bucks a year...

### ***Conclusion***

To be a real political party, we must first be an educational organization, a political lobby, a debating society and a social club. To make your local affiliate grow, figure out what values you can produce for libertarians *now*, and you will grow enough to produce other values in the future.