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Ouch!

Well, another election, and another reinforcement of the Losertarian brand. According to the LP mailing, we have 21 victories, none above sheriff or city council. Unless I missed something, there was not a single partisan victory that wasn't a re-election. We do not need a political party to win non-partisan offices.

"…buoyed by a flurry of local wins" – my @$$. If this is all we are able to do as a political party, it is time to hang it up.

Note that I have not turned in my LP membership card and I am still active. The reason is I think we can do much better. However, I do not think we can do that much better by simply working harder or donating more. And much as I support Geoffrey Neale's efforts to make LPHQ run more efficiently, I don't think that will suffice either. Given that we have lost about a third of our peak membership and budget, a 50% improvement in efficiency is needed just to make up for lost ground.

We need to have some fundamental changes in strategy.

The Current Strategy

At least at the national level, the strategy has been:

- Take a stance that the non-initiation of force is the *only* moral value relevant to politics.

- Focus a great deal of effort on getting press hits from the national office (the expensive Watergate location is a significant part of this).

- Raise money and solicit new members using fundraising letters with unrealistic expectations.

- Total quantity management in the recruitment of candidates.

- Publish a newspaper whose primary purpose appears to be to develop LP celebrities. Technical articles on how to build up the party at the grass roots are a no-no.

- Focus fundraising on clearly unwinnable statewide and nationwide campaigns.

For the majority of these strategies, it appears that the primary goal of the national LP has been to generate press hits seen by the largest number of people.

If that were truly our goal, we would not need a political party with all its expensive overhead. The purpose of a political party is to win elections. Any other

pro-freedom goals can be more efficiently carried out by non-profit corporations (or even for-profit corporations).

Other Options

　　We have other options available. Here are just a few.

　　Realistic races. Third party races go in at a disadvantage. Deal with it. In any partisan race, the legacy parties can count on a certain number of regular voters to vote partisan regardless of the candidate. This means we should expect to spend *more* dollars per vote to win. Ed Thompson is a great guy who put in a heroic effort, but the Libertarian Party just does not have the donor base to finance a governor's race. We do have enough to fund multiple state house races in the smaller states.

　　Focus dollars. This is the strategy of the Libertarian Victory Fund. They have some past successes to demonstrate that this can work. Methinks it is time to do more. For the price of one *USA Today* ad criticizing the drug czar, we could finance one or more competitive efforts at the state house level. Message to all big donors: Virginia has its state house races in the odd numbered years, and they have *no* limitations for individual donors.

　　Focus activists. This is the strategy of the Free State Project. I support the concept. Indeed, I moved from Northern Virginia to Western Carolina to live in an area with a low population density and high Libertarian density. However, getting 20,000 Libertarians to agree on a state strikes me as, shall we say, challenging. It might be good to prove that such a density of Libertarians will in fact result in victory by having a smaller scale "Free County Project" before committing such a huge number of activists.

　　Better tools. This has been one of my favorite tweaks: have wittier radio ads, glossier brochures, catchier bumper stickers, and so forth. I even started a small business to produce such after growing impatient with LPHQ's progress on upgrading their propaganda (but I *do* like their new brochures). However, I think this is just a tweak; worth doing but not enough to produce a real turnaround.

　　Better training. What is the point in recruiting hundreds of candidates who do not know how to conduct a campaign? What is the point of starting affiliates if no one knows what to do once they have one? During my tenure on the LNC I lobbied hard to get *The Libertarian Volunteer* and other "technical" articles put in *LP News,* and I have thrown several temper tantrums over the tepid and skimpy technical content that has finally made it into *LP News*. More training is needed. Alas, I have a caveat: some people *are* getting trained, and I know of some who have taken and followed the training and still got clobbered. It is not enough to train more people; we need to figure out what to train them to do. It is my hope that some of these essays will be part of an improved set of training materials – *after* testing has been done to determine which of these ideas actually work.

　　A better message. I know this is going to hurt, but it is time to admit it: the Libertarian message does not "have legs." I have recently been reading a book on marketing that was the result of a large amount of empirical study. The author claims that the medium is truly *not* the message. A good idea sells; a bad idea

doesn't. TV vs. radio vs. newspapers is largely irrelevant. Wit may be attention getting, but it still does not sell product. It may be time to really review our platform and make a few compromises. Freedom is valuable, but it is not the only value.

So Which is it?

So which of the proposed strategies should we adopt? The answer is: I don't know. But I *do* know how to find out: **experiment!** And I suggest we perform experiments on a small scale before committing to a national strategy.

We can evaluate strategies based on the bottleneck diagrams presented in a previous essay. The three bottlenecks are: **A**. Awareness of LP candidates and their message, **B**. Belief in the LP message, **C**. Credibility.

The focus strategies and the realistic race strategy take care of Bottleneck A. If enough money and/or volunteer time goes into a small-scale race, then name and issue recognition are guaranteed. However, victory is not guaranteed. If people do not like the message and/or candidate, they will not vote for her regardless of amount of advertising. Also, the pro-freedom vote can get split between the LP candidate and the RP candidate. Many libertarians will vote Republican because the Republicans mimic our message to an extent and thereby become "the lesser of two evils." (Bottleneck C).

We can take out Bottleneck C by doing our experiments on two-way races. This takes the "lesser of two evils" argument out of consideration. The LP vote totals reflect this fact. Note how many Libertarians broke 20% in two-way races and how few broke 10% in three-way races.

So, we can rule out the need for the last strategy by finding some major donors to get behind a candidate for Virginia state house next year. There will be many two-way opportunities (in 1999 it was 60% of the races) and I know quite a few presentable candidates in that state. If we can win some races by putting $50K into the campaign treasuries of a few state house candidates next year, then we know the LP message is viable, and all we need to do is concentrate resources to produce further wins. If such a test fails, then some serious soul searching is in order.

Here is a cheaper experiment. Walk your neighborhood, or talk to people at a bar, or somehow put together a semi-random focus group. Explain to them the Libertarian message in ten minutes or less. This is about the level of explanation you will be able to muster in a well-financed campaign. Count the number of people who 1. Dislike the message, 2. Are neutral, 3. Like the message, 4. Are enthusiastic. If on third are enthusiastic, then a Libertarian victory in a three-way race is possible. If half at least like the message then a Libertarian victory in a two-way race is viable, given enough funds. If less than half dislike the message, then victory is still possible with a well-funded charismatic candidate in a two-way race.

Here is the catch: the message you explain to the people *must* include the controversial parts of the LP platform: open immigration, a retreat on foreign policy, and legal crack cocaine. Even if you intend for your candidate to downplay these issues, it is nearly guaranteed that the Demopublican candidate *will* bring up such issues if faced with a real campaign.

Now take those poll numbers. Can we win with our stark message? If not, which is better: to win with half of what we want, or to eternally lose going for everything? Do we keep buying lottery tickets, or opt for a steady job?

It is for this reason that I originally developed Quiz2D. If incrementalism is the way to go, then it is important to know which increments are currently politically viable and which increments should be postponed. I have gathered a fair amount of data; however, my sample is certainly not random. I can say with a fair amount of confidence that marijuana legalization is several times more popular than legalizing all drugs. However, I was not persuasive in this assessment, so LPHQ has proceeded with a campaign against the entire drug war at the federal level. I leave it as an exercise for the audience to determine who was right.

My current experiment is to develop a left-libertarian platform and coalition, based not on the Nolan Chart, but on the chart in my previous essay. Results to date are promising, but far more data is needed before I can declare that I am onto something.

I encourage you all to do your own experiments. Science beats philosophy.