

## CHAPTER 15

### WHY RUN FOR OFFICE AS A LIBERTARIAN?

Obviously, when Libertarians get elected, they can implement libertarian principles directly.

But Libertarians don't win very often, so what's the point of running?

Here's how I see it. As a Libertarian activist, you've got options. You can spend your weekends at tax protests or civil liberties protests, or pro-liberty conferences, and be one more voice making the freedom movement just a bit louder.

Or, you can run for office as a Libertarian and amplify your voice a thousand times.

Libertarian candidates, whether or not they win, get tens of thousands of dollars' worth of free publicity. Instead of just sitting on the couch shouting at your Congressperson on television, if you run for Congress as a Libertarian, there's actually a decent chance you'll get to shout directly to her face on live television in front of tens of thousands of viewers!

Libertarians don't always get invited to debates, but lots of times we do! In 2008, just after the TARP bank bailouts were passed, the

Texas Libertarian candidate for U.S. Senate, Yvonne Schick, was invited to a televised debate. Schick was able to tell incumbent Republican Senator John Cornyn on live statewide television that his votes for the bailouts were wrong.

The co-founder of the Libertarian Party, David Nolan, ran for U.S. Senate in 2010 against incumbent John McCain in Arizona. While Nolan didn't win, he received 4.7%. He also got to debate Senator McCain on television and was able to point out how John McCain had voted for things like the Patriot Act, which threatened our civil liberties.

It would cost tens of thousands of dollars to pay for pro-Libertarian ads that get as much publicity as what you can get for free when you run for office. And it doesn't just stop with televised debates. Libertarian candidates are often included in newspaper stories, invited as guests on talk radio, and are included in widely distributed publications like the League of Women Voters Guide.

Running for office as a Libertarian can be like making a \$10,000 or even a \$50,000 contribution to the Libertarian Party!

Unfortunately, the Republicans and Democrats have created rules that prohibit Libertarians from participating in some events. For example, they won't allow the Libertarian candidate for president up on stage to debate the Republican and Democrat. (After independent Ross Perot got 18% in 1992, they put a stop to that kind of competition.) But Libertarians still get included in lots of events at the state and local levels.

I have recruited hundreds of candidates and have run for office five times myself. Nothing does more to turn a couch potato into a super activist than putting him or her on the ballot for some office—any office. Libertarian candidates get their friends and family to help them—people who never would have gotten involved with the Libertarian Party otherwise.

The first time I ran for office was for Travis County

Commissioner in Texas in 2002. I was scared to death of public speaking, but I decided to run anyway to be part of the team of Libertarian candidates.

When I say scared of public speaking, I mean that in college it was so bad that when I gave a report I would shake, sweat, I could hardly breathe, and it was painfully obvious to the rest of the class. I got a little better after making a bunch of presentations at work, but speaking to a political crowd was still frightening to me.

At one of my first appearances, I did so poorly that my stomach hurt for two days after the event. It wasn't just my imagination. I had a video tape to re-live the horror (which I've since destroyed). I was completely embarrassed and disgusted with myself. Maybe I wasn't going to completely drop out of the race, but I was about ready to quit any campaigning. But I went to one more event, and that went a little better. Each time I did something, I felt a little more comfortable. In the end, I received 5% of the vote against a Republican and Democrat. Not much, but I had gotten some exposure and experience, and I felt more comfortable.

A year later I had sold my business and decided to run for Austin City Council. It was a nonpartisan election, so the word "Libertarian" was not by my name on the ballot. But the press routinely reported the fact that I was a Libertarian. And I was invited to about 40 public events! The beauty of running for office is that you don't have to organize these events yourself. Neighborhood associations, environmental groups, various Democrat and Republican clubs, news organizations and many others will organize events for all the candidates and invite you to participate.

In that city council race, not only did I attend the public events, but I organized 37 volunteers to distribute over 12,000 campaign flyers door-to-door, and I had several volunteers make phone calls to promote my campaign. I didn't win, but I ended up receiving 35% of the vote in a city-wide election. None of that activity would have

happened if I hadn't run for office. That's the power of running for office—the activity and publicity it generates.

I truly believe that, win or lose, every vote for a Libertarian makes a difference. And the more Libertarians on the ballot, the bigger the difference. Besides the activity and publicity, Libertarian candidates put pressure on Democrats and Republicans to move in a Libertarian direction. The news reporter might ask, "How would you find more revenue for education?" Then the Libertarian candidate can say, "I'd like to cut government spending on education instead!"

Libertarians held just over a hundred elected offices nationwide in 2012. Most of these offices are in small jurisdictions, like small city councils and school boards, where it's practical for a candidate to campaign door-to-door and meet lots of voters face-to-face. While Libertarians have won some partisan races (races where they are listed on the ballot as a Libertarian), a majority of the elected Libertarians have been in nonpartisan offices.

I tell people that if you think you have a chance of winning an election, or if you would at least enjoy trying, go for it! Even if you don't win, it will help our cause, and it will be a great experience.

I have to say, I've gotten plenty of grief over the years from Libertarians who criticize me for admitting that Libertarians are likely to lose elections.

They usually say something like, "People won't take a candidate seriously if they aren't running to win," implying that we should never admit we're unlikely to win! Or that I don't care about winning elections, and just want to be part of a debate club where Libertarians argue about what it means to be a perfect Libertarian.

If I believed that saying "I will win" would cause Libertarians to start winning elections, of course I'd do it.

The thing is, the Libertarian Party has been around since 1971, and we've run thousands of candidates who have lost their elections, including lots of candidates who told everyone they were going to

win. (Of course, losing elections is not unique to the Libertarian Party. Nearly all other third parties have similar histories of losing to the entrenched Republicans and Democrats.)

I hope things change and Libertarians start winning more elections, and I have personally worked hard to help make that happen.

But most people already know it's unlikely for a Libertarian to win a particular race, and those people need some rationale for supporting Libertarian candidates with their time, donations, and votes. And I think they need something besides "This time it's different—this time I'll win!" They've already heard that many times.

I wish every member of the Libertarian Party would commit to running as a candidate for something—school board, Congress, city council, dogcatcher, State Senator, County Auditor, whatever. Winning elections is something that I hope will happen in the future. But generating publicity, changing the debate, and forcing changes in policy are things that *can* happen *now*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wes Benedict joined the Libertarian Party in 1996. From July 17, 2009 to December 31, 2011, he served as the executive director of the Libertarian National Committee in the Libertarian Party's headquarters in Washington, D.C. He previously served as the executive director of the Libertarian Party of Texas. There he broke records and made Texas one of the best performing state Libertarian Party chapters. He recruited a record 173 LP candidates for office in Texas for the November 2008 elections, which was 29 percent of the nationwide LP total. In 2012 he co-founded the Libertarian Booster PAC to help promote Libertarian Party candidates entrepreneurially. Mr. Benedict holds an MBA from the University of Michigan and a Mechanical Engineering degree from the University of Texas. He has previously bought and sold a kitchen and bath countertop manufacturing business, and he has worked as a management consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers and a manufacturing engineer for 3M Company.