

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS A LIBERTARIAN?

If I'm talking to someone who might have never heard of the Libertarian Party, I'll often say, "You got the Republicans and Democrats, and in a distant third are the Libertarians." Then I'll go on to explain that Libertarians are for free markets and low taxes like Republicans, but we're also for civil liberties and personal freedoms like Democrats. For example, we're for free speech and okay with gay marriage. We're for freedom on every issue. Then I'll ask them to take the World's Smallest Political Quiz (Chapter 10), because it's the best way I've found to get someone to quickly understand what a libertarian is.

At this point I should mention that, while Republicans usually claim they're for smaller government, they're really not. And while Democrats claim they support personal freedoms, they really don't. Republican and Democratic hypocrisy earned whole chapters in this book.

A libertarian is simply someone who supports liberty.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines libertarian (with a small "l") as "an advocate of the doctrine of free will; a person who

upholds the principles of individual liberty especially of thought and action.” It goes on to define Libertarian with a capital “L” as “a member of a political party advocating libertarian principles.”

You can have libertarian views without being a member of the Libertarian Party, just like you can be a liberal without being a member of the Democratic Party.

The capital “L” is sometimes a helpful distinction. When I capitalize the word Libertarian in this book, I am referring to a Libertarian Party member or Libertarian Party candidate. But when I use the lower case “libertarian” I’m referring to someone who supports the libertarian philosophy, whether or not the person is also a capital-L Libertarian. (When it’s at the start of a sentence, you can’t always tell which one it is, but it usually doesn’t matter.)

Libertarians have used many slogans over the years to describe themselves. Several examples are:

- 1) Fiscally conservative, socially liberal
- 2) More freedom, less government
- 3) We’re pro-choice on everything
- 4) Minimum government, maximum freedom
- 5) Free markets, civil liberties, and peace

Libertarians believe you should be able to do whatever you want with yourself and your property, as long as you aren’t hurting others. Live and let live!

The government we want is one that protects your rights, not one that tries to give you stuff or tell you how to live your life. To quote Thoreau, “That government is best which governs least.”

Libertarianism is a consistent philosophy. You don’t have to memorize the Libertarian Party platform or any other long document to know the libertarian position on an issue. You can usually figure it out on your own. Whatever the issue, we favor less government, or even no government involvement.

We believe that in most cases, government makes things worse

and freedom makes things better. Libertarians can usually back that up with empirical studies.

However, giving the “utilitarian” argument—that a libertarian approach *works* better—is not enough for most libertarians, who would go further and say that freedom is just plain right. People should be free. They have a right to be free. They don’t need a justification for being free. To quote the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Libertarians believe that free markets are the best way to create wealth, unrestricted voluntary trade is the best way to distribute wealth, and a society where people are free to act (without violating the rights of others) is the only society where they can exhibit virtuous behavior.

Libertarians are black, white, young, old, straight, gay, Christian, atheist, yuppie, hippie, vegetarian, hamburger lovers, rich, poor, conservative, liberal, greedy, generous, eccentric, and just plain average.

What do libertarians agree on? Actually, very little. They agree to disagree, and they want a government that lets them do that. Therefore, as libertarians, they agree that the only legitimate role of government is to protect people’s rights: their personal and economic freedom.

Libertarians believe minimal government will result in the best society for all people to live in. It will not be a utopia free of disease, poverty, crime, and other problems. Utopias are impossible. But most libertarians want to make things better, for themselves and for other people.

Libertarians believe that every person should be able to decide where to attend school, what to believe, what to say, who to associate

with, what to eat, and what to buy. But you're not allowed to steal anything, and you need to deal with the consequences of your choices.

Libertarians believe you own yourself, and you are personally responsible for yourself. That doesn't mean you must live all by yourself and pay for everything yourself, and if you are poor, sick, or disabled you're out of luck and must suffer in poverty or die. But instead of government charity or welfare, we think poor and disabled people should rely on *voluntary* charity from family, friends, strangers, or private charitable organizations and churches.

Voluntary charity may sound far-fetched at first. But it's happening around us all the time. One spouse stays home while the other gets a paying job. People take care of their children or sick parents. Friends let unemployed friends live on the couch temporarily. The number of private organizations and personal relationships that involve charity are too large to count. A hundred years ago, government was much smaller in the U.S., and nearly all charity was private.

We don't deny that some people could fall through the cracks. But many people fall through the cracks even with a well-intentioned big-government safety net. Plenty of people get sick, get hurt, or have other bad things happen to them even though there are many government policies and government employees trying to stop those things.

Many studies show that more people suffer poverty in places where government is big, than places where government is small.

Sometimes the word "libertarian" evokes the rugged individualistic image of a strong, capable, self-reliant person (usually male) with plenty of guns and ammo in the woods away from civilization, growing his own food, and perhaps paranoid that government satellites or drones are spying on him. (Not that there's anything wrong with rugged individualists.) But being libertarian does

not require being independent from other people. Libertarians expect relationships, dependencies, and communities to develop. But libertarians support a society where *voluntary* relationships and associations can form, rather than government-imposed relationships.

For example, we oppose government schools because those are forced relationships between people who must pay taxes, and children who must go to the school they are assigned by the government. On the other hand, we support the right of free people to form schools, clubs, churches, insurance associations, issue advocacy groups, or anything else.

America is one of the most libertarian countries on earth (or maybe *least un-libertarian*), so that's good news for Americans. But it's far from perfect. Some things have gotten more libertarian over time, like ending slavery, and allowing gays to come out of the closet without worrying about criminal prosecution. On the other hand, many things have gotten less libertarian. In 1912, there was no federal income tax. Now we pay rates up to 40%.

The United States Constitution is a fairly libertarian document. Of course it contained terrible exceptions, like allowing slavery, which is the opposite of libertarian. And the Constitution still provides for a government post office and an income tax, things libertarians would get rid of. But by and large, our government would be a whole lot smaller if our politicians followed the Constitution.

Unfortunately, the meaning of the Constitution has been perverted to allow for a huge amount of government that the Constitution was intended to prevent.

Libertarians would like to shrink the federal government so that it complies with the Constitution, and then continue shrinking it further. We'd also shrink state and local governments.

Libertarians believe the government should only do what's needed to protect our rights: provide for the national defense, provide police,

courts, and jails, and help enforce contracts. And plenty of those functions could be quite small, perhaps privatized, or even dispensed with in some cases. For example, there are contracts calling for private arbitration instead of using the government's courts; you've certainly seen private security guards; and you've dared to go outside the city limits—where no city government is in force!

While libertarian ideas have been around perhaps forever, the Libertarian Party was founded in 1971. The Libertarian Party is America's third-largest political party. It is the only party dedicated to freedom on every issue. Many Libertarians serve in elected office throughout the U.S., and there are Libertarian Party organizations in all 50 states. We run hundreds of candidates for election every two years, for everything from President and Congress down to state legislatures and local offices. It's great when we win elections and can implement libertarian policies directly. But, whether we win or lose elections, every vote for a Libertarian helps the cause.

The purpose of the Libertarian Party is to nominate candidates for public office and help them get elected, in order to move public policy in a libertarian direction.