

# Let's Fix the Platform

*by Carl S. Milsted, Jr.*

As I have stated in my previous column, the Libertarian Party remains small and loses virtually all of its campaigns because our message is too radical. This is not to say that Americans hate freedom; I am saying that Americans reject radical change of any form.

America needs a libertarian party. The Republican and Democratic parties have put freedom issues on the backburner, leaving the authoritarians and the special interests to incrementally rob us of liberty.

America desperately needs a libertarian political party. It does not have one. The Libertarian Party is not a political party; it is a church, an assembly of people of like mind who gather to reaffirm certain strong values. It has the same relationship to politics that the freemasons have to laying bricks.

This is not to say that the Libertarian party serves no purpose. America also needs clubs and outreach organizations that promote the ideals of liberty. It needs organizations like Cato, Reason magazine, the Institute for Justice, and so forth. The LP belongs in this category, not in the category of a true political party.

The LP can claim rightly that it does things not done by Cato and the like. The LP runs booths at fairs, participates in candidate forums, marches in the street, drops literature and so on. The LP brings the ideals of liberty down to the grassroots. On the other hand, so do such organizations as the Marijuana Policy Project. And unlike groups like MPP, the LP is shackled with the overhead and regulatory burdens of a true political party, so it is unclear that supporting the LP is the most efficient way to promote liberty in the trenches.

And even if supporting the LP was the most efficient way to promote libertarian ideals on Main St., that doesn't answer the pressing need: America needs a libertarian *party*.

It is good to promote ideals, but not enough. Ideals not put into action have little worth. If it were possible for libertarians to successfully run as either Democrats or Republicans, then we would not need a libertarian party. Alas, the track record of the libertarian factions within the major parties is not good. America needs a libertarian party in order to enact the ideals spread by other libertarian organizations.

The Libertarian Party *could* be that party, but it would take some major internal changes for that to happen. It needs to start with an attitude shift, the realization that an American political party cannot be a manifestation of some Platonic ideal. In the United States, political victory comes from winning a majority of votes in a district. This is dramatically different from some parliamentary systems where a fringe party of idealists can gain seats by winning 5% overall, scattered throughout the country. An American political party has to be more mainstream, or it is not a party; it is a club.

A political party is: a collection of factions with some commonality that group together in order to win elections. Note the word collection; a single faction cannot win an election.

A real political party works to broaden itself enough to win elections. To win at the presidential level, this broadening needs to be so large that the parties tend to overlap. To win in safe districts, more purity is possible, but it is still necessary to do polling and focus groups in order to determine how much freedom the voters will accept. We can have a somewhat pure libertarian party that is successful as long as we write off presidential politics and focus on districts where libertarianism is more acceptable.

But is there any district where a Libertarian running on the current Libertarian Party platform can win? I doubt it. Most, if not all, Libertarian victors have run on a subset of the platform and/or on personality/resume.

Try this thought experiment. Imagine a millionaire candidate running in your district, saturating the airwaves with the planks in the LP platform. Imagine full page ads in your local newspaper quoting the platform extensively. Could such a candidate win? Be serious.

Indeed, many purists I have spoken to realize this. *They* have argued that “no one reads the platform” and that “the platform is not a selling document.”

I beg to differ. Far too often we have had presentable candidates rise high in the polls only to be shot down by last-minute ads by the opposition quoting our platform. This was recognized by the Strategic Planning Team, and the strategy of fixing the platform was considered paramount. The reformatting of the platform that happened at the last convention was the result, but it did not go nearly far enough.

Another way in which the platform gets exposed to the public is through the press releases and literature produced by the national office. All such *must* comply with the platform. This has major impact on not only our candidates, but also on recruiting and maintaining members.

The LP platform has several major flaws.

1. The platform *is not* a platform in the sense of the other parties. It is a cross between a manifesto and a laundry list. It is a set of long-term actions. To the outside world, a platform is meant to be a statement of what is to be done in the *next term* of office. By mixing in endgame considerations to a document that is called a platform, we end up sounding far more radical than is intended.

2. The platform is *not* a consensus among libertarians. It reflects just part of the movement. For example, there are libertarians on both sides of the abortion debate. Both sides of the debate agree with the non-initiation of force principle. Both sides are libertarian. But only one side is represented in the platform, and the party remains small accordingly.

3. The platform represents only one value: the non-initiation of force. While this is a very important moral and practical value, there are other values to consider. Such other values are especially important to consider during the process of dismantling excess government. Many government programs exist to fix problems caused by other programs. Order of operations is important.

The first problem was partially fixed by the reformatting of the platform, but the process did not go nearly far enough. The other two problems were barely addressed.

The Libertarian Party could become the libertarian political party that America so desperately needs. We have much of the infrastructure in place. We even have many people in the party who recognize political reality. As I stated before, there was a strong consensus on the SPT (and thus the LNC) that the platform needed fixing. The party does have a large number of realists.

Alas, the party has its share of Platonic idealists who are more concerned with mathematical consistency with one axiom than with implementing those parts of the libertarian ideal that can be sold now. And this group tends to stay seated during the platform debate and fights hard.

Worse yet, the party was founded by radicals, including anarchists, and our rules tend to enshrine the past membership over the present. So there is a lot of work to do on the part of the realists, if the LP is to be turned into a real political party.

For my next columns I will go into detail on how the platform needs to be fixed and possible ways to fix it. I am also gathering names of people of like mind, people who want to see the LP win some real elections and begin to implement liberty. If you like the idea of fixing the platform, please contact me.