

# A Realistic Vision of Victory

By Carl S. Milsted, Jr.

Let us start with some crude assumptions.

1. That our presidential vote totals are roughly proportional to our membership size.
2. That we recover enough to get 0.5% of the presidential vote totals in 2004.
3. That we master direct mail and advertising to the point that we can sustain ~20% membership growth annually, which is a doubling of membership every presidential cycle.

Under these conditions we can *maybe* affect public policy in a libertarian direction via the presidential election *in 2028*. That is, we need roughly a factor of 64 to get about a third of the presidential vote, which is a minimum for victory unless another “third” party seriously splits the authoritarian vote. A factor of 64 requires 6 doublings or 24 years from 2004 according to the assumptions above.

If we use our presidential campaigns as our showcase, as our main vision of victory, we are left with recruiting people who have a quarter-century time horizon. Not only that, but they have to have a quarter-century time horizon under some very optimistic projections, since we have no proven technique of consistently producing 20% annual growth.

Most freedom lovers are less optimistic. Indeed, many would argue that if we do not focus on defensive actions in the near term, there will not be a presidential race in 2028 to run in. Considering that the recent campaign finance reform law theoretically has repealed the first amendment to the Constitution and has declared the existing congresscritters as a new aristocracy, excessive optimism is not warranted.

With such an unrealistic vision of victory, is it any wonder that the Libertarian Party has such difficulty recruiting and retaining members? With such a vision, a Libertarian has to be someone who is so radical that he cannot tell the difference between the two legacy parties, is willing to wait a quarter century for real results, is extremely pessimistic that either of the legacy parties can be reformed, and is optimistic that the Libertarian Party can sustain 20% growth despite a history to the contrary. With such a narrow filter for members, I doubt the LP can grow large enough to win a presidential contest -- at least not without a rich celebrity candidate walking in to save the day -- *ever*.

Recall the premise of my first column: to attain new members, we must turn the LP into a viable tool for increasing liberty *now* – using existing resources.

In general, when faced with the need to improve your success rate at any task in which your resources are fixed, you have a combination of three options:

1. Work harder.
2. Work more efficiently (work smarter).
3. Scrub requirements (eliminate non-critical tasks).

It is best to start with scrubbing requirements, since there is no reason to work harder or smarter at tasks it turns out you do not need to do. So let us ask the question: what is the minimum electoral success necessary to start moving laws in a libertarian direction?

Let us consider a legislative body of 100 members. We place each member on a special directional Nolan chart which is centered on the status quo and has no centrist region. Thus, anyone who wants more economic freedom than the status quo but less personal freedom than the status quo is effectively a conservative. Anyone who wants more personal and economic freedom than we currently have is effectively a libertarian, and so on.

Suppose we have 49 liberals, 49 conservatives and 2 authoritarians. Under this scenario, public policy moves in an authoritarian direction.

49 liberals + 2 authoritarians = 51 for less economic freedom

49 conservatives + 2 authoritarians = 51 for less personal freedom

To move public policy in a libertarian direction we need merely replace the two authoritarians with libertarians.

49 liberals + 2 libertarians = 51 for more personal freedom

49 conservatives + 2 libertarians = 51 for more economic freedom

Or, we could replace 2 conservatives and 2 liberals with 4 libertarians.

47 liberals + 4 libertarians = 51 for more personal freedom

47 conservatives + 4 libertarians = 51 for more economic freedom

To win a legislative seat in a small to medium state requires around 50 to 100 thousand dollars. Contrast this to the 100 to 200 million dollars needed to win at the presidential level. Suppose we need 6 Libertarian victories to cause a shift in our first takeover state. We then need around 300 to 600 thousand dollars; this is less than we already spend on hopeless presidential campaigns. To be more realistic, we should expect to lose some of our signature state house races, so let us round up to a cool 1 million dollars. We are still within what Harry Browne was able to raise running for president.

By scrubbing our requirements, we have found a vision of victory that is at least *100 times easier* than winning a U.S. presidential contest. We can theoretically start moving public policy in a libertarian direction *right now*, using our existing fundraising base. And if we do so, we may well achieve that 20% annual membership growth needed to change the balance of power in more states as well as run that viable presidential campaign in 2028.

## How to Get There

A major problem with the Libertarian Party is that its current membership base was recruited through presidential campaigns and mass mailings talking about presidential campaigns (Project Archimedes). Transferring the enthusiasm and dollars from hopeless presidential contests to real winnable races will not be easy. I have been told by members of the national staff that fundraising letters trying to raise money for focused assistance of winnable campaigns have not brought in nearly as much money as fundraising letters for 50-state ballot access and other such presidential race overhead. Indeed, in the year 2000 more Virginia Libertarians showed up for a Harry Browne fundraiser in Northern Virginia than showed up in the state convention that year.

Here are some possible tactics to focus at least some of the current membership's funds toward productive ends:

1. **Change the LP News editorial policy.** Current LP News policy appears to emphasize races that can get the most press hit eyeballs; that is, the sum of press mentions times the circulation of each mention. This biases the coverage towards the bigger (and usually less winnable) races. This is not just bad electoral strategy; it is bad advertising. Everything I have read on the subject of advertising indicates that it is better to hit 100,000 eyeballs 10 times than 1,000,000 eyeballs once.
2. **Support the Libertarian Victory Fund and related PACS.** They provide the concentration of resources needed to win. Those of you reading this can take this action regardless of policy at LPHQ.
3. **Recruit LP celebrities to run for state house.** Image Harry Browne, Michael Cloud, Perry Willis and Jacob Hornberger running for state house. Think they could raise \$50K each? OK, so maybe this is just a pipe dream of mine. I have personally tried to recruit two of the above to run at the state house level without success. But if enough other Libertarians back up my nagging...
4. **Sell this vision to some of our big donors.** A thousand dollars goes a lot further at the state house level than at the presidential level. Not

only that, many states have higher individual campaign finance limits than the FEC permits for federal candidates. Virginia is unlimited, for example. It is time to stop whining about the FEC and time to make use of existing gaping loopholes.

## Conclusion

There you have it. By scrubbing requirements we have our first factor of 100. Later essays will cover some other factors of 2-5 in efficiency and level of effort. We already have the resources to start moving public policy in a libertarian direction by winning elections. And if we prove we have a viable strategy, we might just convince some former big-L Libertarians to jump back on the bandwagon. Imagine if some of that Cato donor base was to throw money in our direction...

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