

Bob Barr: Libertarian?

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A number of candidates, some better than others, are currently seeking the nomination of the Libertarian Party for president of the United States. Among them is Bob Barr, a former Congressman who joined the Libertarian Party in 2006.

When looking for a candidate for nomination, I tend to prefer avoiding candidates who lean toward the conservative movement, such as Bob Barr and Wayne Allen Root, for the same reason I tend to avoid candidates who lean toward the modern “liberal” movement, such as Mike Gravel.

After all, libertarianism is a unique political philosophy, and although it can certainly appeal to people in both the conservative and modern “liberal” movements, it seems deceptive and dirty to pretend like it is an arm, or a segment, of either of the aforementioned movements. Hence, I tend to prefer candidates like Dr. Ron Paul, Harry Browne, and Dr. Mary Ruwart: candidates who can reach out to disenfranchised members of both Establishment parties while promoting an ideology clearly all its own.

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That is not to say I will simply overlook the popularity of a potential candidate. There is nothing wrong with taking vote totals into account, either. For example, although Ron Paul deviates from my “purer” libertarian views, I unabashedly advocate that he run the remainder of his campaign as a Libertarian. Is Dr. Paul perfect? Certainly not—and especially not on such issues as abortion or immigration—but he could draw massive amounts of votes both from disenfranchised liberals and disenfranchised conservatives. The net gain to the libertarian movement would be far greater than any loss resulting from not running someone a bit more pure. To put it another way, I would rather support a candidate with whom I agree only 95% than with whom I agree 100% when doing so will garner far more votes and provide much more visibility to the party and the broader movement.

We should not, however, consider *only* a potential candidate’s level of fame. We are, after all, still the party of principles. Indeed, our higher dedication to issues over party loyalty is what allowed us to get drawn to a third party in the first place. So, even if we could guarantee ourselves five million, ten million, twenty million, whatever million vote by running a Stalinist, I doubt even the nuttiest member of the Libertarian Party Reform Caucus would say we should. I submit, therefore, that if a potential candidate would gain us a higher loss than gain, we should instead go with a different candidate, or with no candidate at all.

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The question inevitably arises, what constitutes a greater net loss than a net gain? Well, clearly if we want libertarianism to be taken seriously as an ideology, one cause of net loss might be running a candidate who in turn will promote libertarianism as some sort of wing in either the “liberal” or conservative movements, rather than its own distinct ideology. Another means of incurring net loss would be running a candidate who promotes statism while calling him- or herself a libertarian, for clearly this would distort the meaning of the term in the public eye. For this reason, virtually no one supports Daniel Imperato’s candidacy for the Libertarian nomination.

So where does Bob Barr fit into all of this?

Despite early optimism regarding Barr’s conversion to libertarianism, I have of late come to the conclusion that the gentleman is insufficiently libertarian to represent a self-described libertarian party like the Libertarian Party. I have come to the conclusion that nominating him as our candidate would cause greater loss than gain to the movement. This is really depressing, of course, because the man certainly is a good speaker and could no doubt gain us a large number of votes? But even if he *can* get us as much as three million votes, the question I encourage fellow libertarians to ask themselves is: at what cost to the party and to the broader libertarian movement?

Again, allow me to make it clear that I am not on some wacky mission to oust the minarchists from the party. Indeed, I think such activity would be suicidal for the party, and I have held that both factions are valuable to the movement, each for different reasons. Moreover, I sincerely believe that both factions will find their own particular goals harder to achieve if we do not work together toward our shared goals. The debate between minarchists and anarchists therefore belongs primarily in the academic arena. No, this is no witch-hunt against minarchists; rather, I contend that Mr. Barr is so unsatisfactorily libertarian that not even minarchists will wish to nominate this candidate.

Perhaps it behoves me to explain, before going into why I no longer find Barr satisfactorily libertarian, why I had initially felt rather optimistic about his potential candidacy.

I first learned of Bob Barr from C-SPAN. If I recall correctly, he was addressing the American Civil Liberties Union, explaining that he was the only Republican Congressman who could claim to be a member of both that organisation and the National Rifle Association. He had endorsed Michael Badnarik in 2004. Of course, both of these facts are generally pleasing.

I knew that Mr. Barr had voted for the USA PATRIOT Act, however in every interview I had seen, he expressed regret for this action. He readily pointed out that it threatened civil liberties.

In 2006, Mr. Barr officially joined the Libertarian Party and the ranks of the Libertarian National Committee (LNC). Stephen Gordon, editor of Third Party Watch, informed readers that over the past two years, Barr has become considerably more libertarian, even reversing his formerly Big Government stance in support of the war on drugs. Mr. Gordon tells us that Barr would support a “Repeal [of] laws prohibiting adult possession and use of drugs.” Mr. Gordon also reports that Barr “votes WITH the more radical elements on the more controversial roll call votes.”

In February of 2008, Barr voted with the radicals on the LNC to resolve that the “Libertarian Party National Committee calls on the government of the United States to withdraw the armed forces of the United States without undue delay.” According to Eric Garris, “Barr is essentially a ‘born-again libertarian’ who has reversed his statist positions. He now strongly supports ending the US occupation of Iraq and opposes further adventurism in Iran and elsewhere. He now works as a lobbyist for the American Civil Liberties Union and the Marijuana Policy Project.”

My optimism was not unfounded.

Alas, optimism began a slow fade upon Barr’s formation of an exploratory committee. Bloggers immediately noticed that Mr. Barr’s website advocated the adoption of the misnamed FairTax, a proposal that many libertarians accurately claim diverts attention and efforts away from cutting taxes and toward merely reforming the tax code.

In the very least, the FairTax is an annoying bane on the existence of many libertarians. Following the outing of Barr as a FairTaxer, a number of Libertarians—both from the minarchist and the anarchist factions—announced on the Web that they could not vote, in all good conscience, for Barr. Despite immediately realising that this would hurt Barr’s ability to attract some Ron Paul Revolutionaries to his campaign, I decided to overlook this deviation. This decision was made easier by Mr. Gordon assuring us that he would do his best to make sure the Barr campaign focuses on including massive tax cuts. This was, Gordon tells us, to be a modified FairTax.

Then came the letter.

Sent through LibertarianLists, I received a letter written by Bob Barr that downright disturbed me. In this letter, Barr explains his vote for the USA PATRIOT Act as a means of making lemonade out of lemons. Writes Barr, “As much it pained me, I cast an ‘aye’ vote for the very piece of legislation that I oppose today. I could have easily voted against it and, believe me, I wanted to.”

Notice what this means. I had previously thought that Mr. Barr had originally thought this bill was a good idea and, only upon seeing how destructive it was to our Liberty, came to the conclusion that it was a wretched bill and that he ought not have voted for it. But as one can see here, he *knew* it was a bad bill from the beginning—and *voted for it anyway!*

It is one thing to have been deceived. It is another thing altogether to know what you are doing and to do it anyway. I was shocked. Sadly, the worst was yet to come.

Barr continues,

At the time of the vote, a few weeks after the attacks of September 11th, it was clear that law enforcement had a need to quickly identify and confront additional terrorists threats. There was also a need to protect our liberties in the future, long after an immediate threat had passed.

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Rather than casting a no vote, I used the influence that I had with my fellow members of Congress and negotiated a sunset provision for some of the most intrusive aspects of the USA PATRIOT Act. This led to a requirement to reauthorize those provisions, which put those issues back on the table and up for debate long after I left Congress.

I could not believe my eyes. Here is a man running for the libertarian nomination, and instead of apologising for his vote for the USA PATRIOT Act, he *defends* it!

Moreover, he wishes to placate us by saying it was okay, since he had included a sunset provision for some of the most egregious parts of the act. But what sort of a placation is that? If some aspect of a bill is an egregious violation of our rights, then the bill should be voted against. If a Congressperson votes for or a president signs a bill into law, should it not be because he or she believes that every aspect of the bill under consideration is fully defensible, just, and necessary? Keeping in mind Milton Friedman's maxim that there is nothing so permanent as a temporary government programme, Mr. Barr's "solution" seems all the more wildly absurd.

Let us compare this to another event in American history. How would we, as libertarians, react to someone who says that he or she voted for Japanese internment camps? Clearly, we would be appalled, and all the more appalled if the person understood the evils he or she has perpetuated. Would we be placated by this person telling us that it was okay for him or her to vote for the internment camps, since he or she was sure to include a sunset provision on some of the more egregious aspects of the camps?

The answer is self-evident. Yet the usurpations of this administration have been no less egregious in nature than those of Franklin D. Roosevelt's.

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heroin and cocaine if were running at the state level? Barr emphatically tells Hannity, and the listening audience, that he would not.

I did not finally make the decision that Mr. Barr's "born-again libertarianism" was tragically weak, if it exists, when I came across a YouTube video depicting Mr. Barr being interviewed on *Hannity & Colmes*. And what does Mr. Barr say to Mr. Hannity when he asks Barr if he, Barr, would do away with laws against the use of

The Libertarian presidential candidate plays a key role in Libertarian politics. This is because it is rare for local and state candidates to get much media attention. Thus, it is the job of our presidential candidate, who *can* get media attention, to explain the libertarian position to the masses, and essentially to represent the state and local Libertarian candidates in the public eye. In this manner, the presidential candidate helps to get local and state Libertarians elected.

It is not hard, therefore, to see the damage that Bob Barr's type of reply can cause to our candidates. For one thing, it confuses voters as to what the libertarian position on drugs actually is. For another, it fails to explain to voters why the libertarian position—ending the war on drugs altogether—is held by Libertarians. Is it hard to point out that the war on drugs, by creating a

black market, encourages the growth of gangs and a rise in violent crime rates? But Barr mentions none of this, and instead, through the manner and tone in which he answered the question, helped to perpetuate the stereotype that it is simple lunacy to decriminalise drugs.

In summation, I am now fully convinced that the nomination on Mr. Bob Barr would be more detrimental to the Libertarian Party than nominating no one at all. His position on the FairTax will alienate many libertarians. His position on the USA PATRIOT Act does not inspire a shred of faith that he will defend our individual Liberty against the encroachments of the state. And his unwillingness to oppose the destructive, insane war on drugs goes to show what a poor spokesman he would be for libertarian values if he were to be chosen as our standard-bearer.

Given what we now know about this candidate's view on drugs, it seems rather dishonest of him to place his sticker at the 100/100 position on the World's Smallest Political Quiz. Yet, oddly enough, that is where he placed himself. Regardless, Mr. Barr does not represent me, and I have no intention of voting Libertarian for president in 2008 if he is selected as our standard-bearer. Moreover, I have no faith that this gentleman can draw into his campaign the Ron Paul Revolutionaries.

I feel as though I must add a disclaimer before closing. I wish to make it clear that by no means am I advocating, or would I advocate, that anybody walk out of the party if Mr. Barr is indeed nominated. I would and *do* recommend not voting for him in that situation. If Mr. Barr is our nominee, then perhaps it would be a good year to vote for the Personal Choice Party. Or perhaps you would prefer to write in "None of the Above," or even "Ron Paul." Many options are open to you—but please, whatever you do, I do not recommend walking out on the party. Your involvement in the party, regardless of which faction you support, and regardless of whether or not your preferred candidate pulls out ahead, is still important and useful in pursuit of Liberty. Our party has been the victim of mass departures in the past, let us see to it that the same does not happen in 2008.