

# Moderate or Radical?

by Bill Woolsey

Is it better for a Libertarian candidate to run on a moderate or a radical program? This question has been a subject of debate within the Libertarian Party for decades. Some claim that so few Americans support immediate, radical change that only a more “moderate” program will result in enough support for Libertarians to have a significant impact on public policy. Others ask why anyone would support a third party if its “moderate” positions are not significantly different from the two major parties.

To some degree, this long standing debate involves confusion about what is meant by “moderate.” The first question that must be asked is “moderate” by what standard? Most of the Libertarian Party reformers calling for a more moderate program are long-time Libertarian activists. By “moderate,” they mean moderate relative to the stances of past Libertarian Party Presidential campaigns. That doesn’t necessarily mean “moderate” by major party standards. In fact, many Libertarian moderates would like to see Libertarian candidates run on programs that would be quite radical, but radical in the context of the mainstream of American political discourse.

What is the standard within the Libertarian Party? The LP has traditionally emphasized the Presidential campaign. Aside from the Clark campaign of 1980, and perhaps the McBride campaign of 1976, Presidential campaigns have called for immediate radical change. Perhaps the key proposal that has generated this result was the longstanding policy of proposing that the personal income tax be immediately abolished and replaced by nothing. While it is true that the Marrou campaign attempted to disguise the consequences of that policy, generally, there has been acknowledgement that this entails a massive and rapid rollback of the Federal government. Browne’s 1996 campaign book provided a reasonably accurate description of what would be entailed—a 90% reduction in the size of government over four years. Positions on personal liberties and foreign policy are similarly extreme.

It is by that standard that LP moderates call for “moderation.” In their view, the LP should call for reductions in government, but reductions somewhat less than 90%. That could include a 75% reduction, a 50% reduction, a 10% reduction or a 1% reduction.

However, even the most “moderate” of those scenarios wouldn’t be “moderate” by the standards of the mainstream of American political discourse. To be “moderate” by that standard, LP candidates would have to be calling increases in the size and scope of government. Generally, Libertarian “moderates” are proposing nothing of the sort. Most “moderate” Libertarians would like to see candidates with “radical” campaign programs—but “radical” by the standards of mainstream American political discourse. In other words, campaign programs that are “radical” by major party standards.

What Presidential campaigns have been generally considered “radical?” Not by Libertarians, but rather by the media, most politicians, and most voters? One example would

be the successful Goldwater primary campaign in 1964 and the unsuccessful general election campaign that same year. Of course, the Goldwater campaign was conservative rather than libertarian, but it pressed against the edge of the envelope. The media, most politicians, and most voters saw the campaign as extreme—too extreme, both rhetorically and substantively. They lost the general election by a landslide—but received substantially more than 1% of the vote.

An example from the other end of the political spectrum would be the successful 1972 McGovern primary campaign and unsuccessful general election campaign. Again, the McGovern campaign program was liberal, not libertarian. Still, it was generally perceived as being radical. It pressed the edge of the envelope. In fact, the media, most politicians, and most voters found that campaign too extreme. They lost the general election in a landslide, but received substantially more than 1% of the vote.

Sometimes these radical campaigns have failed at the primary level—Reagan in 1976 on the right and McCarthy in 1968 on the left. And, remarkably, they sometimes even win in the general election. For example, Reagan’s 1980 campaign was generally considered radical by the media, most politicians, and many voters. But the time was right. Many voters were even willing to give that sort of conservative “radicalism” a try.

Now were those campaigns really “radical?” Were they “radical” in the sense that the traditional LP campaign has been “radical?” George McGovern didn’t propose that all industry be nationalized, the capitalist class liquidated, and have the U.S. ally with the Soviet Union to help spread the workers’ revolution throughout the world. Ronald Reagan didn’t propose abolishing the income tax, cutting government 90%, stoning homosexuals, and invading the Soviet Union. The far left argued that McGovern’s program was no real challenge to the capitalist system. And there were extreme right wingers who accused Reagan of being a Communist. But the media, most politicians, and most voters, didn’t see it that way. They saw those the McGovern and Reagan campaigns as being significantly and substantially different—proposing significant changes in the status quo. And they were – in context – proposing a change in direction.

A Libertarian campaign that models itself on these sorts of insurgent, idealistic campaigns—but in a libertarian rather than conservative or liberal way—will be perceived as “radical” by the media, by most politicians, and by most voters. They will have plenty of reason to see a third party as being something significantly different from the major parties.

It is time for the LP to give “moderation” a try, but only “moderation” by traditional LP standards. There is plenty of room for the LP to remain “radical” by major party standards. That is, “radical” by the standard of the media, most politicians, and most voters. And maybe, just maybe, the time will come, when most voters are willing to give that sort of libertarian radicalism, a try.