



Libertarians

by Gordon Babst

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Libertarians adhere to the libertarian ideology of the greatest possible economic liberty combined with the least possible governmental regulation of economic and social life. The antecedent to libertarianism is classical liberalism as championed by John Locke (1632-1704) and Adam Smith (1723-1790), two thinkers who advocated the political and economic liberty of the individual, and who viewed the state as the chief threat to an individual's sovereignty.

While some would argue that libertarian political philosophy is best distinguished from its progenitor by its fear-bred insistence on a minimalist state, others would argue that its saving grace is its ardent defense of an individual's right to live life according to his or her own best lights, subject to outside interference only so as to prevent that person from disturbing the social peace by harming another in his or her person or property.

The Negative Vision of Libertarianism

The libertarian understands liberty in negative terms. In the libertarian view, a person should not be prevented from doing something he or she desires to do, unless in so doing he or she harms another. By contrast, the modern liberal understands liberty also to mean empowering an individual to do something, such as through state-sponsored public education and other social welfare provisions.

The libertarian's anti-paternalist view of the state, a view derived from John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and recently echoed in the works of Robert Nozick (1939-2002), makes libertarianism a potential political preference for persons in the glbtq community, especially fiscal conservatives, because of the strong stance it takes against legal moralism.

However, for persons who consider the state the appropriate and effective agent in areas such as education, health care, protection of the environment, and regulation of the economy, libertarianism is not an appropriate ideology.

Libertarianism versus Conservatism

Libertarianism is a response to modern liberalism's expansion of the authority and mission of the state, and is often confused with conservatism. Conservatives also emphasize the economic freedom of ownership of private property, but they tend to give less freedom to individuals in making social and moral choices than do libertarians.

While conservatives often argue that the moral purposes of liberty are *not* a matter of individual choice, libertarians believe that they always are. Hence, in matters such as sexual privacy, there is a wide gulf between conservatives and libertarians, with libertarians championing individual choice in sexual matters.

The Libertarian Party in the United States

The Libertarian Party in the United States was founded in 1971 by disillusioned Republicans and Democrats, and others, and has continuously run candidates for President since 1972. It first achieved third place in the national election of 1984. Its high water mark was in 1996, when it earned a place on the ballot in all 50 states, and received approximately 5.4 million votes for various public offices at all levels of government.

Since libertarians are especially keen to return power to individuals and take it away from big government, it is not surprising that some gbtq people have been active in the Libertarian Party, including serving as candidates for local and national office.

The libertarian is not necessarily an advocate of gay and lesbian rights, but he or she would certainly want the state out of a person's bedroom, and would question governmental regulation of marriage.

The National Platform of the Libertarian Party of the United States, for example, includes the following statement of principle: "We believe that adults have the right to private choice in consensual sexual activity. We oppose any government attempt to dictate, prohibit, control, or encourage any private lifestyle, living arrangement, or contractual relationship. We support repeal of existing laws and policies which are intended to condemn, affirm, encourage, or deny sexual lifestyles or any set of attitudes about such lifestyles."

Although Libertarians view the market as an instrument of social discipline that provides just outcomes for every productive citizen if left to run on its own, or *laissez-faire*, they are liberal in leaving moral decisions to the individuals affected.

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