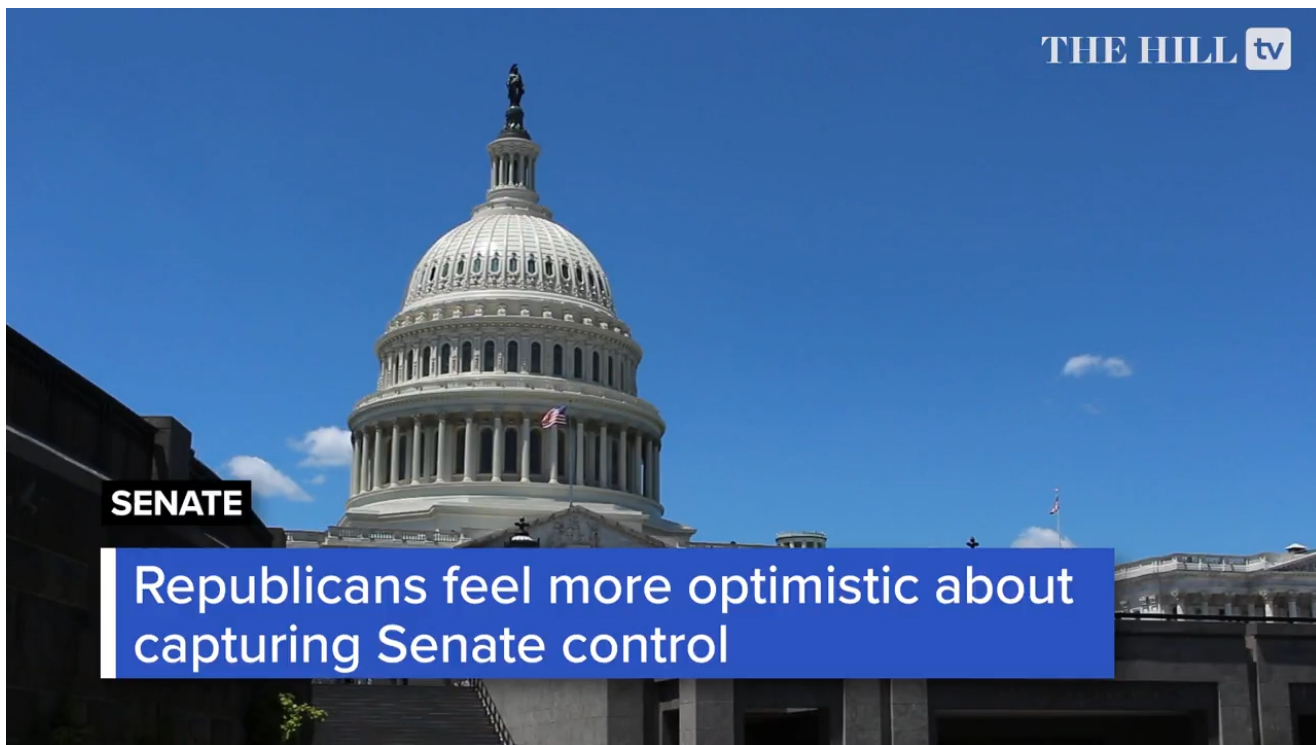


OPINION > CIVIL RIGHTS

## The Libertarian Party is collapsing. Here's why

BY ANDREW KOPPELMAN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 10/09/22 1:00 PM ET

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Only a few years after its greatest triumph, the Libertarian Party is collapsing, torn apart by an insurgency of alt-right sympathizers with racist tendencies. Libertarianism, the idea that state power must be absolutely minimized, relies on ideas of individual rights that seem flatly inconsistent with racism. And yet libertarian rhetoric has always had powerful attractions for those who wanted to resist racial equality. How is that possible?

I just published [a history of libertarianism](#). The book is a critical introduction to this ideology, which has done so much to shape American politics. I focused on its major thinkers — Hayek, Friedman, Epstein, Rothbard, Nozick and Rand — and sought to address their strongest arguments. None of them were racists, and most rejected racism vehemently, so I largely ignored the linkage with racism. Yet now it presents itself.

In May, the party was [taken over](#) at its national convention by the so-called Mises Caucus, a far-right group, some of whose members have been associated with [racist and antisemitic ideas](#). The caucus is named after the libertarian economist [Ludwig von Mises](#), whose philosophy was pretty crude (as I explained in the book) but who firmly [condemned racism](#).

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day this year, the Libertarian Party of New Hampshire [tweeted](#) (in a later deleted post) that “America isn’t in debt to black people. If anything it’s the other way around.” Caucus members [have called](#) for violent repression of antifa and Black Lives Matter protesters. The new leadership’s first and most prominent decision was [to remove](#) from the party platform language declaring, “We condemn bigotry as irrational and repugnant.”

As a result, the party is [facing mass defections](#). In 2016, [Gary Johnson](#) was the most successful Libertarian presidential candidate in history. He got almost 4.5 million votes (3.3 percent of the votes cast, three times more than any previous Libertarian candidate, including Johnson himself in 2012).

The crackup is in part the result of crass political machinations. The insurgents are funded by donors who have been close to former President Trump, suggesting that the takeover is part of a [coordinated Republican stratagem](#) to destroy a party that has been draining away Republican votes. If [Trump](#) had gotten every Libertarian vote in 2020, [he would have won](#). The chairman of the New Mexico Libertarian Party [wrote](#) that the leadership has “adopted messaging and communications hostile to the principles for which the Libertarian Party was founded, serving no purpose other than to antagonize and embarrass.” That may indeed be the purpose. Battles for control of the state party [are also happening in Virginia and Massachusetts](#).

This stratagem would not be possible unless the alt-right people were available for recruitment. There is a reason why they joined the Libertarians instead of the Greens, another third party whose principles are equally antithetical to them.

The connection between libertarianism and race dates back to 1964. After he had the Republican presidential nomination, Barry Goldwater (himself no racist) voted against the

coalition. Eisenhower had gotten about 40 percent of the black vote in 1956; Nixon in 1960, about a third; Goldwater, 6 percent. Goldwater was the first Republican ever to win in Georgia and the first since Reconstruction to carry Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina. Richard Nixon's eagerness to woo the voters who had supported George Wallace in 1968 consolidated the racial polarization of American politics.

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Racism seems to be part of libertarianism's appeal to some Americans. It is easier to oppose government power if you don't like what that power will be used for. Some of the libertarian leadership noticed that and has made racist appeals for decades. Some libertarians even dream of abandoning the state for clusters of self-governing enclaves, some of which could be all white. Ayn Rand called racism "the lowest, most crudely primitive form of collectivism." But her condemnation of unproductive, parasitic "moochers" has more resonance when you think you know who those people are.

Libertarianism offers a peculiar vision of the heroic solitary individual who sustains himself without any external support. It says, "I don't depend on anybody. I can take care of myself." This fantasy of autarky can also involve the capacity to separate from people one doesn't like. It denies any obligation to them that might be based either on shared membership in a community or on a history of wrongs that one has involuntarily benefited from. The fantasy is easy to swallow if it means that one gets to keep more of what one has. Here as elsewhere in libertarian thought, there is an active partnership between delusion and greed.

*Andrew Koppelman, John Paul Stevens Professor of Law at Northwestern University, is the author of "Burning Down the House: How Libertarian Philosophy Was Corrupted by Delusion and Greed" (St. Martin's Press). Follow him on Twitter @AndrewKoppelman.*

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