

Why Libertarians Are Seeing Political, Social Clout Grow

A new statistical portrait of libertarians examines their political and cultural views just as a Libertarian Party candidate could make a difference in the upcoming Virginia governor's race.

The Public Religion Research Institute's annual American Values Survey, released Tuesday, examines libertarians to try to "pin down a group that doesn't fit on the traditional liberal-to-conservative spectrum," said Robert Jones, CEO of PRRI.

"We were not sure we could find a coherent group that could say they oppose making abortion more difficult and at the same time oppose raising the minimum wage. But we did."

Like their ideological opposites, the Tea Party, which PRRI studied in 2010, libertarians are just 7 percent of U.S. adults. An additional 15 percent of Americans lean toward libertarian views—socially liberal, economically conservative—while 17 percent of Americans said they leaned toward the Tea Party. Most Americans (54 percent) hold a mixture of views, PRRI found.

(The survey of 2,317 U.S. adults was conducted Sept. 21 to Oct. 3, before the Tea Party-endorsed government shutdown.)

PRRI found libertarians are overwhelmingly (94 percent) non-Hispanic white and mostly male (68 percent). They're also young. The average age is 44, while the national average is 47; Tea Party folks average slightly older, at 51.

On religion, libertarians tilt to the mainline Protestants (27 percent) and the secular (27 percent say they have no religious identity). Only 11 percent are Catholic, 6 percent

identified with a non-Christian faith and 4 percent named another Christian group. (The tally is less than 100 percent due to rounding.)

But libertarians are like the Tea Party adherents (chiefly white evangelicals and Catholics) in one respect: Politically, they're beginning to punch above their weight.

"There are opportunities for libertarians to play a bigger role in primaries," said Jones, even though only 8 percent of libertarians identify specifically with the Libertarian Party.

Such opportunities are in play now in Virginia's gubernatorial race.

Libertarian Party candidate Robert Sarvis has little chance to win next Tuesday (Nov. 5). However, , a website published by an American libertarian group, points out that if Sarvis wins 10 percent of the general election vote, then his party will gain the right to be on state and local ballots without having to submit petition signatures. In future elections, winning just a few state senate seats could make libertarians the swing vote on major issues.

More immediately, Sarvis could hurt the Republican candidate, Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli II, by siphoning off young white male voters, giving an advantage to Democratic contender Terry McAuliffe.

"In any race where there's a libertarian, the candidate that stands to lose votes is the Republican candidate. Only 5 percent of libertarians call themselves Democrats, but 45 percent call themselves Republican," Jones said.

The survey used two methods to identify libertarians – self-identification and a spectrum of questions on economic and social issues. Although 13 percent of Americans called themselves libertarian, "we found the label is fairly loosely held," said Jones. Only 7 percent qualified by the scale of

viewpoints that PRRI developed.

Some have claimed an overlap between the Tea Party and libertarians. David Kirby, a vice president of FreedomWorks, and Emily McClintock Ekins, polling director for the Reason Foundation, wrote for the Cato Institute on the “Libertarian roots of the Tea Party.” Looking at the 2008 elections, they concluded it was libertarian anger with the GOP, and pessimism and frustration with government, that plowed the ideological ground for the Tea Party.

“We would disagree on this. We just don’t see it,” said Jones. “These are groups that overlap on some issues but are largely very dissimilar.”

Among other PRRI findings:

- There is a notable exception to the generally socially liberal views of libertarians. On legalizing same-sex marriage, 59 percent oppose it. This may reflect that two in three libertarians are men and 63 percent of libertarian men oppose gay marriage; libertarian women were evenly divided on the issue.
- Most libertarians (61 percent) do not consider themselves a part of the Tea Party movement and only one in four Tea Party people would call themselves libertarian.
- Only 22 percent of libertarians say they belong to the religious right or conservative Christian movement, which is “overwhelmingly made up of white evangelicals and white Catholics,” said Jones. But most Tea Party followers (52 percent) say they are part of the Christian right.
- Asked their preferred presidential candidate for 2016, Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is the Tea Party favorite among registered voters, while libertarians lean to Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky.
- While they line up with the Tea Party in opposition to

government involvement in the economy, health care and environmental protections, 70 percent of libertarians “favor allowing doctors to prescribe lethal drugs to help terminally ill patients end their lives, and a nearly identical number (71 percent) favor legalizing marijuana.”

- Where Tea Party and libertarians coincide, libertarians often hold a markedly more intense position. Their opposition to the Affordable Care Act is fiercer: 96 percent of libertarians oppose it, compared with 78 percent of Tea Party followers. Similarly, 65 percent of libertarians but only 57 percent of Tea Party followers oppose raising the minimum wage.

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