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Routing

The Libertarian Vote

by David Boaz and David Kirby

Executive Summary

The main theme of political commentary in this decade is polarization. Since the battles over the impeachment of President Clinton and the Florida vote in 2000, pundits have been telling us that we're a country split down the middle, red vs. blue, liberal vs. conservative. Political analysts talk about base motivation and the shrinking of the swing vote. But the evidence says they are wrong.

Not all Americans can be classified as liberal or conservative. In particular, polls find that some 10 to 20 percent of voting-age Americans are libertarian, tending to agree with conservatives on economic issues and with liberals on personal freedom. The Gallup Governance Survey consistently finds about 20 percent of respondents giving libertarian answers to a two-question screen.

Our own data analysis is stricter. We find 9 to 13 percent libertarians in the Gallup surveys, 14

percent in the Pew Research Center Typology Survey, and 13 percent in the American National Election Studies, generally regarded as the best source of public opinion data.

For those on the trail of the elusive swing voter, it may be most notable that the libertarian vote shifted sharply in 2004. Libertarians preferred George W. Bush over Al Gore by 72 to 20 percent, but Bush's margin dropped in 2004 to 59-38 over John Kerry. Congressional voting showed a similar swing from 2002 to 2004. Libertarians apparently became disillusioned with Republican overspending, social intolerance, civil liberties infringements, and the floundering war in Iraq. If that trend continues into 2006 and 2008, Republicans will lose elections they would otherwise win.

The libertarian vote is in play. At some 13 percent of the electorate, it is sizable enough to swing elections. Pollsters, political strategists, candidates, and the media should take note of it.

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The main theme of political commentary in this decade is polarization. Since the battles over the impeachment of President Clinton and the Florida vote in 2000, pundits have been telling us that we're a country split down the middle, red vs. blue, liberal vs. conservative. Liberals and conservatives read different books, watch different networks, and go to different churches.

But, in fact, a substantial number of Americans don't fit into that liberal-conservative dichotomy. As we demonstrate below, 10 to 20 percent of Americans could be described as fiscally conservative and socially liberal, or libertarian. They tell pollsters that they tend to oppose government involvement in both economic and personal affairs, meaning they don't fall into either the liberal or the conservative camp. That's a substantial part of the electorate in any election and especially in elections as close as recent presidential and congressional votes. There is evidence from polling data that libertarians shifted significantly away from Republican candidates in 2004. Libertarians are increasingly a swing vote, and they are a larger share of the electorate than the fabled "soccer moms" and "NASCAR dads." And lately neither party has shown much interest in the libertarian vote, as Republicans counter big-government liberalism with their own big-government conservatism.

Why is this substantial and growing libertarian strength not more widely recognized? We see several reasons:

- We are all trapped in our dominant paradigms. Political scientists have taught for more than 50 years that politics is arranged on a liberal-conservative continuum. It's simple, and comfortable, and we like such systems.
- It also seems to fit political activists and elected officials better than it fits the public. Politicians in both parties face two kinds of pressure: to conform to the party line and to accommodate themselves to big government. That pushes elected officials in the direction of big-

government conservatism and big-government liberalism. No wonder libertarians are becoming swing voters, having been abandoned by both parties.

- Libertarians are less likely to be organized than either liberals or conservatives. Social conservatives have evangelical churches, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family constantly advocating their views with Republican strategists. Liberals have unions and identity-politics groups and advocacy groups like MoveOn.org. Libertarians have think tanks. People who want something from government—whether spending programs or lifestyle regulations—are more likely to organize politically.
- Organized punditry also contributes to the flawed idea of the liberal-conservative spectrum. Every cable talk show debate features one liberal and one conservative, one red and one blue, one Gingrich and one Estrich, one Coulter and one Moore. In so doing, those shows neither serve nor reflect their audiences. They fail to give their viewers a reliable understanding of the distribution of political ideas in America, and they offer no leaders or spokespeople for the 10 to 20 percent of Americans who hold libertarian ideas. Indeed, in the words of identity-politics activists, they "invisibilize" libertarians.
- Pollsters tend to ask people to define themselves as liberal or conservative, not including a libertarian option, and then to report the results that way. Thus they too "invisibilize" libertarians.
- Most voters who hold libertarian views don't identify themselves as libertarian, though many of them would say they are "fiscally conservative and socially liberal."

This paper presents evidence on the size of the libertarian vote and suggests that it will become an increasingly significant part of a divided electorate.

Liberals and Conservatives

The 2004 election was marked by talk of “bringing out the base.” Both parties turned their attention to finding and engaging people already inclined to vote for them. As early as 1992, political scientist Raymond E. Wolfinger argued that most independents vote as weak partisans, like “closet Republicans and Democrats.”¹ Joshua Green reported in the *Atlantic* that the 2000 election had seen “the lowest voter crossover ever documented.”² With that in mind, Bush pollster Matthew Dowd argued immediately after the election that the emphasis on swing voters was misplaced; the key to reelection would be “base motivation.”³ Democratic nominee John F. Kerry, less appealing to moderate voters than Bill Clinton, likewise focused on finding and motivating Democratic voters.

In many ways the 2004 strategists were just acting on what political scientists had long been saying. The traditional premise of postwar political science was that Americans could be divided into liberals, conservatives, and “confused.” The orthodox definition was that a liberal favors government intervention in the economy and protection of civil liberties, while a conservative is opposed to both economic intervention and the expansion of civil liberties. Anyone whose views did not fit those categories was explained away as “confused.” Scholars such as Herbert McClosky, Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Everett Carl Ladd, Charles Hadley, Norman Nie, and Sidney Verba relied heavily on that liberal-conservative continuum as the organizing principle for examining American ideology. That tendency was strengthened by evidence that political activists, especially party activists, do closely fit the liberal-conservative dichotomy.⁴ Political scientists William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie of the University of Central Florida wrote in 1984:

If we look closely at the way in which ideology has been studied, we find that all these studies share a common approach: A single liberal-conservative

dimension is the primary tool for evaluating the presence and direction of ideological thinking among the public. None of these studies seriously considers the possibility that the public’s belief systems may be organized in more diverse and complex ways. Citizens whose attitudes do not fit the liberal-conservative definition are categorized as nonideological or inconsistent.⁵

Challenging the Liberal-Conservative Continuum

Evidence shows that not all Americans are in fact either liberal, conservative, or confused. Maddox and Lilie, in a 1981 paper and then in a 1984 book, laid out a four-way matrix of American ideologies (Figure 1):

We propose a two-dimensional approach as the basis for the analysis of mass belief systems. We measure attitudes toward economic intervention by government and attitudes toward individual liberties as separate dimensions and consider four ideological categories based on these two dimensions: liberal, conservative, libertarian and populist. Our definitions of liberal and conservative are generally consistent with current practice; there are also, we will argue, valid grounds for including the categories of libertarian and populist. Our approach, then, is an outgrowth and complement to current research in that it includes the liberal and conservative categories as traditionally defined, but attempts to account for many of those others who are [in the words of one highly regarded political science book] “consistent in ways we do not recognize.”⁶

Drawing on poll data from the University of Michigan’s Center for Political Studies, they constructed a new matrix of political ideologies. They selected three CPS questions relating to government intervention in the economy and three others involving personal freedom and “social issues.” On the basis of answers to those

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**Figure 1
American Ideologies: A Four-Way Matrix**

		Government Intervention in Economic Affairs	
		For	Against
Expansion of Personal Freedoms	For	Liberal	Libertarian
	Against	Populist	Conservative

Source: William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1984), p. 5.

questions, they categorized respondents as liberal, conservative, libertarian, or populist. Of course, even with four categories instead of two, they still found 15 to 25 percent of poll respondents impossible to classify ideologically. (Libertarians would probably consider the opposite of “libertarian” to be “statist” or even “authoritarian,” rather than “populist.” But those are ideologically charged terms, and political scientists have tended toward the term “populist” to mean those who tend to support both government intervention in the economy and restrictions on personal freedoms.)

After tabulating the data, they found that libertarians were 17.7 percent of the electorate in 1980, up from 9.4 percent in 1972. Maddox

and Lilie suggested two basic reasons for the increase: a general shift in the electorate toward skepticism about government intervention and support for expanded personal liberties, and a generational shift as the more libertarian baby-boom generation became a larger part of the electorate (Table 1).

Maddox and Lilie weren’t the only ones reconsidering the political spectrum in the early 1980s. In the *Almanac of American Politics 1982*, Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa offered a similar four-way matrix of political beliefs. “Strictly on the basis of intuition,” they suggested that 30 percent of the population could be described as liberal on economic issues and conservative on cultural issues

**Table 1
Distribution of Ideological Types in the 1970s (percent)**

Ideological Category	1972	1976	1980
Liberal	17.3	16.4	24.4
Populist	30.0	23.7	26.3
Conservative	18.3	18.0	16.5
Libertarian	9.4	13.0	17.7
Inattentive	5.7	9.6	4.6
Divided	19.2	19.2	10.6
Total ¹	99.9	99.9	100.1
	(n = 1176)	(n = 2403)	(n = 1408)

Source: William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1984), p. 68.

¹Totals vary slightly because of rounding.

(the Maddox-Lilie populists), and 25 percent might be conservative on economic issues and liberal on cultural issues (libertarians).⁷ In 1982 the *Baron Report*, a newsletter written by the late Alan Baron, and *National Journal*, under the direction of public opinion analyst William Schneider, began using a more sophisticated, three-dimensional analysis of members of Congress, recognizing that many members “are not liberal or conservative across the board.” They chose about a dozen issues each from economic, social, and foreign policy and rated members of Congress as liberal or conservative on each dimension. A few (though only a few) members had liberal ratings on economics and conservative scores on social issues, or vice versa, thus earning the designation “populist” or “libertarian.”⁸

Land of the Free

It’s no surprise that many Americans hold libertarian attitudes since America is, after all, a country fundamentally shaped by libertarian values and attitudes. In their book *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marx write, “The American ideology, stemming from the [American] Revolution, can be subsumed in five words: antistatism, laissez-faire, individualism, populism, and egalitarianism.”⁹ Herbert McClosky and John Zaller made a similar point in 1984: The “American ethos” is a combination of capitalism and democracy, which “evolved side by side as part of a common protest against the inequities and petty tyrannies of Old World monarchism, mercantilism, and the remnants of feudalism. Both aimed to free the individual from the dead hand of traditional restraints and to limit the power of the rich and well-born to exploit the less privileged.”¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter wrote: “The fierceness of the political struggles in American history has often been misleading; for the range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise. However much at odds on specific issues, the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the

philosophy of economic individualism, the values of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture.”¹¹ And Samuel Huntington: “Prevailing ideas of the American creed have included liberalism, individualism, equality, constitutionalism, rights against the state. They have been opposed to hierarchy, discipline, government, organization, and specialization.”¹² McClosky and Zaller sum up a key theme of the American ethos in classic libertarian language: “The principle here is that every person is free to act as he pleases, so long as his exercise of freedom does not violate the equal rights of others.”¹³

While an instinct for freedom may be a universal human value, the commitment to political liberty is not universal. Even in liberal-capitalist Europe, liberty is embraced less fully than in the United States. McClosky and Zaller cite a 1982 Gallup poll: “When asked whether personal freedom or equality was more important, Americans preferred freedom over equality by a margin of 72 percent to 20 percent. In Western Europe, by comparison, only 49 percent chose freedom while 35 percent chose equality.”¹⁴ Those differences are persistent. In “Views of a Changing World 2003,” the Pew Global Attitudes Survey reported: “Fully 58% of Americans say it is more important to have the freedom to pursue personal goals without government interference, while just 34% say it is more important for government to guarantee that no one is in need. In most other nations, majorities embrace the opposite view”—by 62 percent in France and Great Britain, 57 percent in Germany (only 52 percent in former West Germany), and 71 percent in Italy.¹⁵ Some people recognize but bemoan our libertarian ethos. Professors Cass Sunstein and Stephen Holmes complain that libertarian ideas are “astonishingly widespread in American culture.”¹⁶

Much political change in America occurs within those guiding principles. Even our radicals, Lipset and Marks note, have tended to be libertarian rather than collectivist. America is a “country of classical liberalism, antistatism, libertarianism, and loose class

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structure,” which helps to explain the failure of class-conscious politics in the United States.¹⁷ McClosky and Zaller argue that many of the changes of the 1960s involved “efforts to extend certain values of the traditional ethos to new groups and new contexts”¹⁸—such as equal rights for women, blacks, and gays; anti-war and free speech protests; and the “do your own thing” ethos of the so-called counterculture, which may in fact have had more in common with the individualist American culture than was recognized at the time.

In a broadly libertarian country most voters and movements have agreed on the fundamentals of classical liberalism or libertarianism: free speech, religious freedom, equality before the law, private property, free markets, limited government, and individual rights. The broad acceptance of those values means that American liberals and conservatives are fighting within a libertarian consensus. We sometimes forget just how libertarian the American political culture is; consider, for instance, the possibility that a newspaper deemed “blasphemous” or offensive to some group would be shut down. Any such suggestion in the United States would be stopped point-blank with the comment “That violates the First Amendment,” and almost everyone—liberal, conservative, libertarian, or even populist—would agree. But in other countries it can and does happen. Americans embrace capitalism, religious freedom, and a constitutionally limited government at a far deeper level than citizens of most other countries. And that broad libertarian consensus may have allowed voters who embrace a stronger dose of libertarian values to remain hidden in plain sight. But some new data may help to reveal their existence.

Libertarians Today

The common story line these days is that there are conservatives who support lower taxes, less regulation, gay marriage bans, and the war in Iraq and voted for President Bush

in 2004, and liberals who support bigger government, national health insurance, gay marriage, and withdrawal from Iraq and voted for Sen. John F. Kerry in 2004—and not many true independents or swing voters who cross those categories. But it’s not so hard to find counterexamples if you look.

Consider the 2004 exit polls.¹⁹ They provide examples of people who don’t fit neatly on either side of the liberal-conservative, red-blue divide. According to the poll, for instance, 25 percent of respondents support same-sex marriage, of whom 22 percent voted for Bush, with 77 percent perhaps understandably for Kerry. Another 35 percent support civil unions, and 52 percent of those voted for Bush. That means that 28 million Bush voters support either marriage or civil unions for same-sex couples—not your stereotypical “red” voters.

Similarly, 49 percent of respondents told exit pollsters they did not think government should “do more to solve problems.”²⁰ Of those, 29 percent voted for Kerry—that’s 17 million Kerry voters who thought government should not do more. In a remarkable corroboration, a completely different calculation comes to the same result. The 2004 post-election survey of the American National Election Studies found that 29.1 percent of self-identified Kerry voters preferred the statement “The less government the better” to “There are more things the government should be doing.” Based on Kerry’s popular vote total, that is once again 17 million Kerry voters who prefer “less government.”²¹

So between Bush voters who support gay marriage or civil unions and Kerry voters who want less government, we have 45 million voters who don’t seem to fit neatly into the red-blue, liberal-conservative dichotomy. Indeed, they seem to have broadly libertarian attitudes. Why would gay-union supporters vote for Bush? Presumably because they don’t like Democratic positions on such issues as taxes and regulation (or, of course, on terrorism and national security, but we’re omitting foreign policy issues from this analysis because they are not easily categorized in yes-no, more gov-

ernment-less government dichotomies). And why would people who want less government vote for Kerry? Perhaps because they don't like Republican attitudes toward gay marriage, abortion, or other social issues; or the Bush administration's intrusions into civil liberties; or the war in Iraq. A 2004 *Wall Street Journal* article identified some of those voters: "Anger at President Bush and some of his policies has aroused some wealthy Americans who in the past were politically ambivalent. Mr. Bush—by stoking his party's religious-right base on issues like gay marriage, stem-cell research and abortion—has pushed toward the Democrats some well-heeled people who share a more Republican aversion to high taxes and more regulation."²² The common red-blue story line doesn't fit those voters.

Ignoring Libertarians

In the traditional emphasis on the liberal-conservative continuum and the more recent focus on a red-blue divide, libertarian voters have often been ignored. That may be in part because libertarians tend to be less involved in organized politics.

Campaign field directors know where to find other voter demographics. You find gun owners at the gun range or through the NRA, churchgoers at church, business owners through the Chamber of Commerce, union members through unions, black voters in churches and neighborhoods, and so on. Where do you find libertarians? There are no libertarian equivalents of the Christian Coalition or MoveOn.org. Field directors in search of libertarians may venture into Libertarian Party conventions—a tiny slice of the libertarians—only to discover a baffling cross section of dissatisfied Americans, and quickly reject the whole enterprise.

Campaign strategists who instinctively know that libertarians are "out there" may dismiss them as unwinnable at any reasonable cost. Campaigns are about allocation of scarce resources—advertising dollars, signage, door-to-door volunteers, and, above all, candidate time. If the resources it takes to win one libertarian vote are more than the

resources for traditional constituencies, it is easy to rationalize away libertarians as a low priority.

Career politicians may be afraid to accommodate more libertarian positions because they may alienate traditional constituencies. Fundamentally, people who want something from government—whether it's farm subsidies, national health insurance, faith-based initiatives, or bans on your neighbors' activities—are more likely to be politically active than those who just want to be left alone to live their lives and run their businesses. Serving in Congress also takes its toll on libertarian-minded officials. Studies show that the longer a member of Congress stays in office, the more spending he or she tends to vote for.²³ Members of Congress are under constant pressure to go along with both their party leadership and the Washington establishment, neither of which is likely to push in a libertarian direction.

It may also be that libertarians, who have colder feelings toward the major political parties and weaker preferences toward politicians, are alienated from the political process. Lots of libertarians are too engaged with their businesses, their families, or their personal pursuits to care much about politics. Even libertarians with enough interest in politics to get elected governor don't seem to be really committed to political life. Three libertarian-leaning governors—the brilliant lawyer William Weld, the eccentric entertainer Jesse Ventura, and the true citizen-politician Gary Johnson—all seemed either to get bored with political minutiae, to be unwilling to play the political game with other politicians, or simply to tire of politics sooner than most elected officials do.

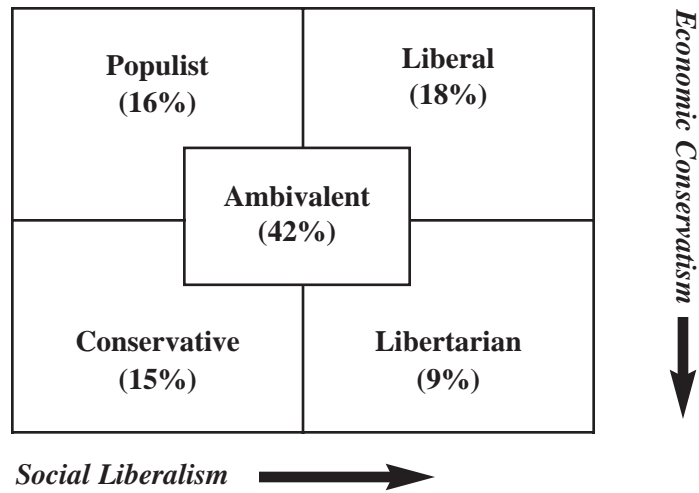
But political strategists who ignore the libertarian vote do so at their peril.

The Libertarian Vote

Libertarian voters do exist, and new poll data help us to discover them. Some pollsters have followed the Maddox-Lilie approach: use one or more questions on both economic and social issues to categorize respondents

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Figure 2
Distribution of Respondents to Pew Poll



Based on responses to 6 questions: 3 dealing with role of government in the economy and social welfare issues, and 3 dealing with social issues.

Source: Pew Research Center, “In Search of Ideologues in America,” April 11, 2006, <http://pewresearch.org/obdeck/?ObDeckID=17>.

as liberal, conservative, libertarian, or populist. Other polls provide sufficient data to allow us to perform such calculations ourselves.

In all of these calculations, we use a broad definition of libertarian. We include both individuals who would self-identify as libertarian and individuals who hold libertarian views but may be unfamiliar with the word. It is clear that many people who hold libertarian views don’t self-identify as libertarians. One Rasmussen poll found that only 2 percent of respondents characterized themselves as libertarians, even though 16 percent held libertarian views on a series of questions.²⁴ Similarly, two polls conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation for the Clark for President Committee in 1980 found that only 1 percent of respondents described themselves as libertarians. After they were read a definition of libertarianism, they were asked again “do you consider yourself liberal, conservative, libertarian, or middle-of-the-road?” This time 10 percent of the public aged 18–40 and 12 percent of the total public (in separate surveys) declared themselves libertarians. The gains came almost equally from liber-

als, conservatives, middle-of-the-roads, and “don’t knows.”²⁵

In April 2006 the Pew Research Center issued an analysis of data from its December 2004 survey of 2,000 people.²⁶ Researchers used three questions on economic issues—government health insurance, government regulation, and private retirement accounts for Social Security—and three social issues—gay marriage, banning books in school libraries, and government promotion of morality. They then sorted respondents into the four categories based on their answers to those questions. Their results are shown in Figure 2.

They found only 9 percent libertarians, a lower number than most surveys found. It should be noted that Pew found a high number of respondents who couldn’t be categorized, so the libertarians are actually 15.5 percent of those respondents who could be categorized (the 58 percent who are not “ambivalent”), still the smallest ideological group. The small number may also reflect Pew’s inclusion of the issues of guaranteed health insurance and gay marriage, two topics on which libertarian views are currently a smaller minority than on many

Many people who hold libertarian views don’t self-identify as libertarians.

other contemporary issues. (It should also be stipulated here that no simple poll questions can adequately capture political ideology; intellectuals of any variety could object to almost all of the questions used in these polls. Like the pollsters, we've tried to use the questions that seemed to best capture broad differences among ideological groups.)

For more than a dozen years now, the Gallup Poll has been using two questions to categorize respondents by ideology:

- Some people think the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses. Others think that government should do more to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your own view?
- Some people think the government should promote traditional values in our

society. Others think the government should not favor any particular set of values. Which comes closer to your own view?

Combining the responses to those two questions, Gallup found the ideological breakdown of the public shown in Table 2. With these two broad questions, Gallup consistently finds about 20 percent of respondents to be libertarian.

For our own analysis, we used a narrower definition of libertarian voters. We added a third Gallup question to the screen:

- Do you think the federal government today Has too much power, Has about the right amount of power, or Has too little power?

Only those respondents who said "government is trying to do too many things," "gov-

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Table 2
Where Americans Stand on the Political Spectrum (percent)

Date	"Pure Liberal"	"Populist"	"Libertarian"	"Pure Conservative"	Undesignated
2006, Sept. 7-10	21	20	21	25	12
2005, Sept. 12-15	24	19	21	27	9
2004, Nov. 19-21	16	19	23	30	12
2004, Sept. 13-15	20	20	17	29	14
2003, Sept. 8-10	19	22	19	31	9
2002, Sept. 5-8	18	23	19	29	11
2001, Oct. 5-6	18	30	17	23	12
2001, Sept. 7-10	16	18	22	30	14
2000, Sept. 11-13	16	18	18	30	18
1999, Sept. 10-14	15	23	23	31	8
1998, Oct. 29-30	14	23	19	29	15
1998, Apr. 17-19	13	17	21	34	15
1997, Jan. 31-Feb. 2	13	17	24	31	15
1996, Jan. 12-15	13	20	20	35	12
1994, Nov. 2-6	15	20	20	32	13
1994, Oct. 22-25	16	19	21	33	11
1994, Jan. 15-17	16	20	22	30	14
1993, Dec. 17-19	13	23	22	31	11
1993, Apr. 22-24	17	25	20	27	11
1993, Mar. 22-24	20	27	19	24	10

Source: Gallup Governance Surveys, 1993-2006, reported in Gallup Poll news release, September 7-10, 2006.

The libertarian vote is substantial and growing.

**Table 3
Libertarians as Percentage of Voting-Age Population**

	2002	2003	2004	2005
Percent libertarian	9	11	9	13

Source: Authors' calculations from Gallup Governance Survey 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005.

Note: Our questions screen for libertarian respondents and were not intended to classify other respondents as liberal, conservative, or other.

ernment should not favor any particular set of values," and "federal government has too much power" were classified as libertarian. Using that narrower screen (and only the four most recent governance surveys), we find the results shown in Table 3.

The American National Election Studies data also allow us to identify libertarians in the electorate. ANES has asked the same questions for 15 years. We used these questions:

- Next, I am going to ask you to choose which of two statements I read comes closer to your own opinion. You might agree to some extent with both, but we want to know which one is closer to your own views: ONE, The less government, the better; or TWO, There are more things that government should be doing?
- ONE, We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems; or, TWO, The free market can handle these problems without government being involved.
- We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own

moral standards, even if they are very different from our own. (Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement?)

Only those respondents who said "the less government the better," "the free market can handle these problems," and strongly agreed or agreed that "we should be more tolerant" were classified as libertarian. The results we found using those three questions to screen respondents over the past 15 years are shown in Table 4.

Finally, we used three questions from the Pew Research Center Political Typology survey:

- Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient; OR, Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.
- Government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest; OR, Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good.
- The government should do more to protect morality in society; OR, I worry the

**Table 4
Libertarians as Percentage of Electorate**

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2004
Libertarians as % of voting-age population	9	9	11	13	13
Libertarians as % of reported voters		12	12	14	15

Source: Authors' calculations based on American National Election Studies, various years.²⁷

Note: ANES surveys are taken after the election and attempt to identify actual voters in the just-completed election.

government is getting too involved in the issue of morality.

Using those three questions from the Pew 2004 survey, we find that 14 percent of the voting-age population can be classified as libertarian.

Overall, we conclude that the libertarian vote is substantial and growing. Figure 3 presents five different calculations. The Pew Research Center's Typology Survey assessed it at 9 percent, while the Gallup Governance Surveys consistently assign about 20 percent of respondents to the libertarian category. Using our own methods, we have three data points for 2004 using separate data sets—Gallup at 9 percent (but 13 percent in the 2005 survey), ANES at 13, and Pew at 14. Our best estimate is that the libertarian vote is about 13 percent of the national population, or 28 million Americans of voting age. According to ANES, from 1992 to 2004, the libertarian vote grew 4 percentage points, from 9 to 13 percent.²⁸

A Note on Validity

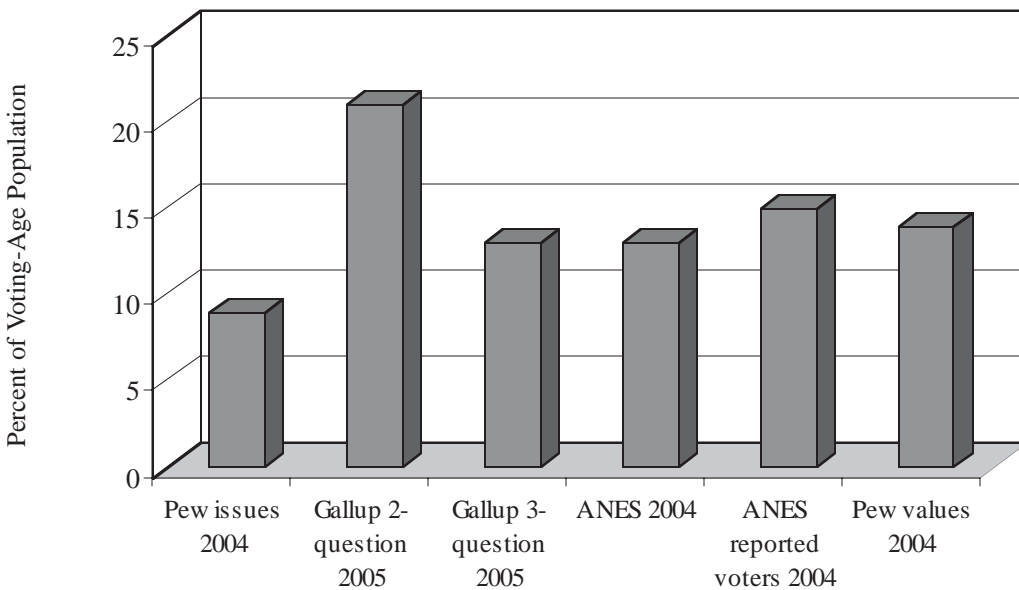
As noted above, no survey of ideologies is definitive. Simple poll questions cannot ade-

quately capture the nuances of any ideology. Intellectuals could quibble with the wording of all these questions. Certainly we do not claim that the “libertarians” these polls identify have read Ayn Rand or Robert Nozick. But we do think that the questions we have used are valid for identifying people who cannot fairly be classified as either “liberal” or “conservative” as those terms are understood in contemporary American politics. The screens identify Americans who fall outside the red-blue divide in a broadly libertarian direction, skeptical of government involvement in both economic and personal matters.

To check that claim, we performed a validity test on two groups of ideologically sophisticated respondents, employees of the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heritage Foundation. We asked each group to answer the nine questions drawn from the Gallup, ANES, and Pew surveys, along with several other questions from those surveys that we did not choose to use in our national screening. We also asked each respondent to self-identify his or her own ideological position. Those tests confirmed that our questions are correctly separating libertarians from conservatives. More details can be found in the Appendix.

Our best estimate is that the libertarian vote is about 13 percent of the national population, or 28 million Americans of voting age.

Figure 3
Measures of Libertarians in the Electorate



There is evidence not only that libertarians exist, and that they vote, but that their votes are currently in flux.

Table 5
Voting Behavior of Ideological Types in Presidential Elections, 1972–1980 (percent)

Ideological Type	1972 ¹		1976 ²		1980		
	Nixon	McGovern	Ford	Carter	Reagan	Carter	Anderson & Others
Libertarian	75	24	66	30	66	18	17
Conservative	84	16	65	34	78	17	5
Populist	57	42	39	61	41	57	3
Liberal	40	59	30	67	31	54	15
Divided	70	30	45	53	43	44	13

Source: William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1984), p. 104.

¹0.87 percent of sample voted for other candidates.

²1.9 percent of sample voted for other candidates.

Swinging Libertarians

So how do libertarians vote? Candidates and political organizers may think it's all well and good to claim that some 13 percent of the electorate is libertarian. But unless it affects their voting, it hardly matters to the politicians. We think there is evidence not only that libertarians exist, and that they vote, but that their votes are currently in flux. Libertarians may well be the next soccer moms or NASCAR dads.

Given the dominance of fiscal and economic issues over the past generation, it is perhaps not surprising that libertarians have tended to vote Republican. Using CPS data (the precursor to ANES), Maddox and Lilie found the vote breakdowns given in Table 5 in 1972, 1976, and 1980.

Using ANES data, we find that libertarians have voted heavily Republican in recent presidential elections, but with interesting variations (Table 6). In 1988, given a choice between watered-down Reagan in the form of George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis's combination of big-government orthodoxy and "card-carrying membership in the ACLU," libertarians voted 74–26 for Bush. In 2000 libertarians gave 72 percent of their votes to George W. Bush, who said every day on the campaign trail, "My opponent trusts government. I trust you," and only 20 percent to Al Gore, of whom Bush's claim seemed entirely too accurate.

But in 1992, after the senior Bush's tax increase, libertarians split their previously Republican majority almost evenly between Bush and third-party candidate Ross Perot. That suggests that the libertarian affinity for Republicans is easily broken. It might also suggest that libertarians have a high tolerance for eccentric candidates. Note that libertarians also gave a high percentage of their votes to third-party candidates in 1996 (Perot again) and 1980 (independent John B. Anderson and perhaps Libertarian Party candidate Ed Clark, who got 1.1 percent of the vote that year).

But for those on the trail of the elusive swing voter, the real news in this table is 2004. The libertarian vote for Bush dropped from 72 to 59 percent, while the libertarian vote for the Democratic nominee almost doubled.²⁹ It's not hard to imagine why. Bush's record on federal spending, centralization of education, expansion of entitlements, the war in Iraq, executive authority, the federal marriage amendment, and civil liberties was certainly sufficient to dissuade libertarian voters. Kerry, alas, offered little for libertarians other than "not Bush." He voted for the war and the Patriot Act, never articulated a clear alternative position on either, and offered standard Democratic support for higher taxes and spending. Nevertheless, he narrowed the Republican majority among libertarians from 52 points to 21 points.³⁰

Table 6
How Libertarians Voted for President, 1988–2004 (percent)

	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	Swing Potential
Democratic candidate	26	32	29	20	38	18
Republican candidate	74	35	58	72	59	-39
Third-party candidates	0	33	13	8	3	33

Source: Authors’ calculations from ANES data.

Like other Americans, libertarians who worried most about the threat of terrorism preferred Bush to Kerry. In 2004, according to the ANES data, libertarians accounted for 13 percent of the total adult population of the United States. Of those, half told pollsters that “terrorism” was the most important issue in the last four years.³¹ Others were widely split, citing the economy, the war in Iraq, civil liberties, or other issues as most important. Of those libertarians who identified terrorism as the most important issue in the last four years, 80 percent voted for George W. Bush, while 20 percent voted for John Kerry. Of those who identified anything else as the most important issue, 56 percent voted for Kerry, and 39 percent voted for Bush.³² In other words, libertarians for whom terrorism was the most important issue were twice as likely to vote for Bush. If terrorism is not as critical a decision point in upcoming elections, or if support for Bush’s handling of terrorism declines, then perhaps libertarians frustrated with big-government Republicans will be less likely to stick with them on national security grounds.

Anecdotal evidence fleshes out this picture. Consider some voters quoted in newspapers in 2004: Republican investor Doug Andrews in Colorado told the *Financial Times* that “the world is much more dangerous as a result” of the Iraq war.³³ Missouri nurse Terry Hammer voted for Bush in 2000 but was appalled by the anti-gay marriage amendment.³⁴ Financial consultant Kim Mecklenburg, featured in a Moveon.org ad, said she had always voted Republican but felt “betrayed [by] reckless spending.”³⁵ Missouri farmer Faye Pavelka likes tax cuts but only if you also reduce spending.³⁶

Internet millionaire Eric Greenberg raised \$100,000 for Republicans in 2000 but in 2004 raised far more for Democrats because of what he saw as Republican restrictions on stem-cell research.³⁷

Anecdotal evidence from prominent libertarians confirms the importance of the issue of terrorism in 2004. Libertarian-leaning Louis Rossetto, who started *Wired* magazine, intended to vote for Bush: “Bush may be wrong about everything else, but he is right about the issue that matters most for my children’s future: stopping Islamic fascism.” David Kopel of the Independence Institute said: “This will be the first election in which I have ever voted for a Republican for president. We’re in a war in which the survival of civilization is at stake, and Bush is the only candidate who realizes the gravity of the danger we face and who is determined to win World War IV,” language echoed by Vermont libertarian author and gadfly John McClaughry. Law professor Eugene Volokh also cited the war on terrorism in his decision to vote Republican.³⁸

In a 2003 paper, Daron R. Shaw and Paul Janowitz of the University of Texas define swing voters as “voters who, over some set of elections for a given office, cast votes for more than one party’s candidates.”³⁹ We might add that any identifiable group of swing voters ought to be big enough to make a difference in the outcome. By that definition, libertarians have clearly become swing voters in American elections.

Down-ticket Voting and Turnout

We can observe the same libertarian swing in 2004 congressional races. Table 7 shows

For those on the trail of the elusive swing voter, the real news is 2004.

**In House races,
the libertarian
vote for
Republican
candidates
dropped from 73
percent in 2000
to 53 percent
in 2004.**

Table 7
How Libertarians Voted for U.S. House and Senate, 2000–2004 (percent)

		2000	2002	2004	Swing
House	Democratic candidate	23	23	44	+ 21
	Republican candidate	73	70	53	– 20
	Independent/3rd-Party/Other candidate	4	6	3	– 3
Senate	Democratic candidate	23	15	43	+ 28
	Republican candidate	73	74	54	– 20
	Independent/3rd-Party/Other candidate	4	10	4	– 6

Source: Authors' calculations from ANES Panel and Time Series Data.

that in House races, the libertarian vote for Republican candidates dropped from 73 percent in 2000 to 53 percent in 2004, while the libertarian vote for the Democratic candidates increased from 23 to 44 percent.⁴⁰ We observe the same for Senate races.⁴¹

Many commentators noted the high turnout in the 2004 election. Nationally, voter turnout increased 6.1 percent.⁴² That might help explain some of the swing in 2004. According to ANES data (Table 8), libertarians reported turning out to vote at higher percentages than total respondents in 2000 and even higher in 2004.⁴³

This libertarian swing trend is particularly pronounced by age. Libertarians aged 18–29—many of whom were new voters in 2004—voted 71–42 for Kerry. Libertarians aged 30–49 voted almost completely the reverse, 72–21 for Bush (Table 9).

Who Are the Libertarians?

The Pew study presented a demographic breakdown of all four ideological groups, plus the “ambivalents.” (Note that this study found a smaller percentage of libertarians than most studies do, but the demographics may still be similar.) According to Pew, libertarians are more numerous in the younger generations. That raises the question of whether they will become more conservative on personal freedom issues as they age, or indeed whether they will become more “conservative”—more supportive of the New Deal/Great Society/Compassionate Conservatism welfare state—on spending issues. In general, we think not. As baby-boom demographer Landon Y. Jones wrote, citing the pioneering sociologist Karl Mannheim, “The crucial question regarding a person’s politics—or a generation’s—is not how old the person is but when the person was

Table 8
Voter Turnout Statistics for President (percent)

	2000	2004	Increased Turnout
Actual voter turnout ¹	54.2	60.3	+ 6.1
Reported voter turnout, all respondents	71.6	76.2	+ 4.6
Reported voter turnout, libertarians	78.2	86.1	+ 7.9
Libertarian difference	6.6	9.9	+ 3.3

Source: ANES Times Series and Michael P. McDonald.

¹Michael P. McDonald, George Mason University, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.

Table 9
How Libertarians Voted for President, by Age, 2004 (percent)

Age	Kerry	Bush	Other	% of Total
18–29	71	24	5	17
30–49	21	72	7	35
50–64	26	74	0	25
65+	41	48	10	23

Source: Authors’ calculations from ANES 2004 Time Series.

young.”⁴⁴ Social and political experiences in one’s youth have a powerful formative impact.

According to the Pew data (Table 10), libertarians are more likely to be male and affluent and to live in the West. They are also less religious than conservatives and populists (though slightly more religious than liberals). That might correlate with their high vote for Perot; it was reported in 1992 that the Bush campaign’s polls showed that Perot voters were very similar to Bush’s, “except they don’t go to church.”⁴⁵ The Pew data show libertarians to be better educated than average, though not as well educated as liberals. That finding is not consonant with other studies. Maddox and Lilie, for instance, found libertarians in 1980 to be just as likely as liberals to have a college or graduate degree.⁴⁶

Our own analysis of the ANES data looked only at libertarians, not at other groups (Tables 11–13). Generally speaking, libertarians cooled to Bush from 2000 to 2004. They had colder feelings toward Kerry than toward Gore, despite voting in larger numbers for Kerry—more evidence that libertarians tended to vote against Bush, not for Kerry. For the 2008 presidential front runners, libertarians have very cold feelings toward Sen. Hillary Clinton, but they’re warming. Libertarians feel no more warmly toward John McCain than the general public, perhaps understandable since his “straight-talking” independence and leadership on the treatment of detainees may be outweighed for many libertarians by his vigorous support for cracking down on political speech.

Libertarians tend to follow public affairs more closely than the general public and con-

sider themselves well informed. However, this leads libertarians to have colder feelings toward Congress, the federal government, and political parties in general. Libertarians are more likely to be secular and infrequently attend church. They have cooler feelings toward the Christian Coalition and warmer feelings toward gay men and lesbians than do other voters. Libertarians are substantially more likely to own stocks than are other voters, making them a key part of the “investor class.”⁴⁷

Libertarians are more likely to say that neither political party represents their views. Understandably, then, half of libertarians claim to be independent, neither Republican nor Democratic, and in 2004 equal numbers of those chose a Democratic or Republican affiliation when pressed.

Interestingly, libertarians seem more likely than the average person to switch their party leanings. From 2000 to 2004, we find a 10 percentage point increase in independent libertarians who lean Democratic and a 6 percentage point decrease in libertarians who identify as Republican. This calls into question the thesis that the number of “true” independents is shrinking and that most independents really vote like “closet Republicans and Democrats.” Among libertarians, party affiliation seems to be only weakly held.

Given their affluence and high levels of education, libertarians are likely to vote in high numbers, despite being less organized and less focused on politics. And as noted above, that is what we see. In the ANES data

Libertarians are more likely to say that neither political party represents their views. Half of libertarians claim to be independent.

Table 10
Demographics of Ideological Groups (percent)

	All	Libertarians	Conservatives	Ambivalents	Liberals	Populists
Gender						
Male	48	59	51	46	47	46
Female	52	41	49	54	53	54
Race						
White	80	82	83	77	82	80
Black	12	7	10	14	7	15
Income						
\$75,000+	21	31	21	18	29	13
\$50,000–\$74,999	14	10	14	14	16	12
\$30,000–\$49,999	22	18	26	22	20	25
\$20,000–29,999	14	14	15	14	12	15
<\$20,000	17	14	16	18	13	19
Education						
College grad	27	30	25	22	48	16
Some college	24	27	24	22	26	26
H.S. or less	49	43	51	55	26	58
Age						
18–29	21	33	15	22	25	14
30–49	39	36	44	38	42	39
50–64	22	21	23	22	22	23
65+	16	9	17	16	11	23
Religion						
White Protestant (all)	44	32	56	43	34	54
Evangelical	21	9	38	20	7	33
Nonevangelical	23	23	18	24	26	21
White Catholic	17	21	14	18	18	15
Secular	8	12	3	6	19	5
Attend Church						
Weekly or more	40	28	55	40	20	54
Monthly or less	34	36	30	35	38	33
Seldom or never	25	35	15	24	41	12
Region						
Northeast	19	15	20	18	26	17
Midwest	24	22	23	26	21	21
South	35	31	38	35	23	47
West	22	32	19	21	29	15

Source: Pew Research Center, “In Search of Ideologues in America,” April 11, 2006, <http://pewresearch.org/obdeck/?ObDeckID=17>.

Table 11
Libertarian Demographics (percent)

	2000		2004	
	All	Libertarian	All	Libertarian
Gender				
Male	44	57	49	62
Female	56	43	51	38
Race				
White	78	89	71	81
Black	12	2	16	4
Latino/Hispanic	6	4	7	6
Respondent income				
\$105,000 +	2	6	5	13
\$75,000–\$104,999	5	9	3	5
\$50,000–\$74,999	10	17	13	21
\$25,000–\$49,999	31	30	28	27
<\$24,999	52	38	50	34
Education				
4 yrs. college +	24	38	26	34
Some college	28	31	28	34
H.S. graduate	33	23	31	22
< H.S.	15	8	15	10
Age				
18–29	21	19	21	18
30–49	41	44	38	36
50–64	20	22	24	25
65+	17	15	16	20
Religion				
Protestant	49	44	55	44
Catholic	31	30	25	28
Jewish	2	3	3	5
Other/none	17	23	15	18
Attend Religious Services				
Every week	25	23	23	22
Almost every week/ once or twice a month	26	20	27	23
A few times a year	15	17	15	16
Never/don't attend	33	40	35	39
Census Region				
Northeast	19	16	20	23
North Central	25	24	25	25
South	35	38	34	27
West	21	22	20	25

Source: Authors' calculations from ANES 2000, 2004.

Table 12
Libertarian Political Feeling Thermometers (percent)

	2000		2004	
	All	Libertarian	All	Libertarian
Feelings toward political figures				
George W. Bush	57	64	56	60
Al Gore/John Kerry	57	45	52	47
Hillary Clinton	51	36	55	43
John McCain	58	61	61	61
Feelings toward institutions				
Congress	58	56	58	55
Federal government in Washington	55	48	57	51
Feelings toward groups				
Christian fundamentalists	52	48	59	51
Christian Coalition	54	48	n/a	n/a
Gay men and lesbians	47	47	47	53
Environmentalists	53	48	66	61
Labor unions	56	46	58	49
Political parties, in general	53	50	n/a	n/a

Source: Authors' calculations from ANES 2000, 2004; reported mean values; scale 50–100 = favorable/warm; 0–50 = unfavorable/cold; 50 = neither warm nor cold; n/a means the question was not asked in that year.

Table 13
Libertarian Political Profile and Party Identification (percent)

	2000		2004	
	All	Libertarian	All	Libertarian
Political Profile				
Follow government/public affairs? (most/some of time)	54	61	67	78
Own stock? (yes)	52	67	50	62
Presidential preference strong/not strong? (not strong)	23	26	17	26
Prefer divided government? (better when split)	50	53	n/a	n/a
Does any party represent your views? (yes)	n/a	n/a	72	65
Party Identification				
Strong Democrat	19	5	16	6
Weak Democrat	15	8	15	9
Independent-Democrat	15	11	17	21
Independent-Independent	12	11	9	8
Independent-Republican	13	21	12	21
Weak Republican	12	17	13	13
Strong Republican	13	23	17	21
Other; minor party; apolitical	1	4	1	1

Source: Authors' calculations from ANES 2000, 2004.

libertarians are in every year a higher percentage of actual voters than of the voting-age population.

Libertarians in 2004 and Beyond

About 122 million people voted for president in 2004, up from 105 million in 2000. If libertarians were 13 percent of that number (our ANES calculations actually found libertarians at 15 percent of reported voters), that suggests about 16 million libertarian voters. Had President Bush received 72 percent of the libertarian vote, as he did in 2000, he would have had 11.4 million libertarian votes. Instead, he received only 59 percent, or 9.4 million. Had those 2 million voters not switched to Kerry, Bush's narrow 2004 win would have been a resounding reelection. It's often remarked that Bush came within 60,000 votes of losing Ohio and thus the electoral vote. But as Ryan Sager notes in *The Elephant in the Room*, he also came within 60,000 votes of losing Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico, with a total of 19 electoral votes, which would also have given Kerry the presidency despite a loss in the popular vote.⁴⁸ And there's little doubt that the libertarian vote is as strong in the Mountain West as anywhere. If Bush had dropped to 50 percent of the libertarian vote, he would likely have lost those three states.

The libertarian vote seems to be in play. Kerry picked up some 2.8 million libertarian votes despite offering libertarians very little except his being the only alternative to Bush. Kerry voted for the Iraq war and the Patriot Act, opposed gay marriage, and had no economic program except the old Democratic agenda of higher taxes and interest-group spending programs. Imagine a Democratic candidate who, say, supported private accounts for Social Security (as President Bill Clinton considered doing in 1998), promised to cut wasteful programs, and actually defended civil liberties. He or she would surely build on Kerry's 38 percent support from libertarians.

In any case, 13 percent of the electorate is a substantial number, one well worth the attention of strategists in both parties and beyond. As

a benchmark for comparison, ABC News polling director Gary Larson debunked the much discussed "NASCAR dad" as a "single-digit" share of the national population, only "2 percent of all voters" in the 2000 exit polls.⁴⁹ *Slate* editor Jacob Weisberg noted in 1996, "Narrowly defined as married, college-educated, suburban women with school-age children, soccer moms constitute only 4 percent or 5 percent of the electorate."⁵⁰ According to 2000 exit polls, members of the "religious right" were 14 percent of all voters.⁵¹ Libertarians are about as large a segment as the religious right and much larger than other heralded swing demographic groups.

Moreover, a 10 percent shift among libertarian voters is 1.3 percent of the electorate, or a 2.6 percent swing if those voters switch from one party to another. In our evenly divided electorate, that's a lot. In his strategy memo for the Bush-Cheney reelection effort, Matthew Dowd said that self-described "independent" voters "are independent in name only. Seventy-five percent of independents vote a straight ticket" for one party or the other. True swing voters are only 6 percent of the population.⁵² If he's right, libertarian-leaning voters are a big portion of current swing voters. And of course, it takes two new base voters to replace one swing voter who switches from one party to the other, so strategists should pay close attention to swing voters.

The Big Picture

In an important 1998 essay, Mark Lilla of the University of Chicago wrote about "the cultural revolution that we call 'the Sixties' and the shift in political and economic attitudes that, for lack of a better word, can be termed 'the Reagan revolution.'"⁵³ He argued that the right continues to resist the cultural changes of the 1960s, and the left continues to resist the economic changes of the 1980s. Few political analysts have come to terms with the fact that the same generation lived in the 1960s and the 1980s. Many of the same people were involved in the anti-war movement or the

If Bush had dropped to 50 percent of the libertarian vote, he would likely have lost three states.

Conservatives resist cultural change and personal liberation; liberals resist economic dynamism and globalization. Libertarians embrace both.

counterculture in the 1960s, the personal liberation and self-help movements of the 1970s, and the entrepreneurial upsurge of the 1980s. All those trends build on the liberal individualism of the American ethos and point toward the weakening of traditional authority structures and an increase in individualism and self-reliance.

Conservatives resist cultural change and personal liberation; liberals resist economic dynamism and globalization. Libertarians embrace both. The political party that comes to terms with that can win the next generation.

Generational change is an important part of the story. As noted above, libertarians are more likely to be young than are liberals, conservatives, or populists. For the foreseeable future, that suggests the likelihood of growing libertarian strength. Astute analysts have noted that trend for some time. The late Republican strategist Lee Atwater said in 1985, "Each year the populists will probably decrease in number and the libertarians will grow larger and larger as a result of the influx of the baby boomers into the decision system."⁵⁴ D. Quinn Mills, a Harvard Business School professor and author of a book on baby-boom executives, told *Fortune* that 60 percent of young managers in the 1980s could be considered libertarian.⁵⁵

Baby boomers, of course, are now middle-aged, the bulk of American voters. They have been followed by Generation X, the baby busters born in the late 1960s and 1970s. Douglas Coupland, the author of *Generation X*, the novel that gave the group its name, told *USA Today*, "The old left-right paradigm is not working anymore. Coming down the pipe are an extraordinarily large number of fiscal conservatives who are socially left." *USA Today* went on to write:

What liberalism was to the Sixties and conservatism was to the Eighties, libertarianism may be to the youth of the 1990s—the *de facto* philosophy of a generation steeped in the precepts of latch-key self-reliance and the individual freedoms of the Internet.⁵⁶

Republican pollster Kellyanne Fitzpatrick agreed: "Above all, Xers are entrepreneurial, self-reliant, multicultural, tolerant, and libertarian."⁵⁷ Those are the people who now live in the neighborhoods that reporter Jackie Calmes described recently in the *Wall Street Journal*:

As the [Republican] party has grown more socially conservative over the past quarter-century, the suburbs where many Republicans live have become more diverse and politically independent, marked by a mix of fiscal conservatism and social liberalism that is testing Republicans' dominance there.⁵⁸

As Lilla noted, the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the economic revolution of the 1980s both happened. Every year a larger number of people have grown up in a world of tolerance, with gay friends, with minorities represented at all levels of society, with most women working. It is unlikely that those people will ever be conservative in a pre-1960s sense. Similarly, the old orderly economy of big business and big labor with lifetime employment and guaranteed pensions is gone in a world of free trade, globalization, and creative destruction. Political organizers who expect to rebuild the old liberal-Democratic or conservative-Republican coalitions are likely to be disappointed.

Conclusion

We noted earlier several reasons that the libertarian slice of the electorate tends to be overlooked: The liberal-conservative paradigm is familiar and comfortable. Although libertarians vote in large numbers, they are less likely to be organized in political pressure groups. The news media perpetuate the idea of a liberal-conservative, red-blue dichotomy.

The increasing safety of incumbents also plays a role at the congressional level. Incumbents have made their own lives much easier over the past few decades by making it

much more difficult for outsiders and challengers to mount effective campaigns. Politics has become more professional, with year-round campaigning, fundraising, and strategizing. Members of Congress have created taxpayer-funded websites, mailing lists, and television studios to get their message out, a public relations barrage difficult for any challenger to match. As a Cato Institute study showed, Congress creates increasingly complex laws and then offers help to constituents who have trouble navigating the vast federal bureaucracy, thus earning credit with grateful voters.⁵⁹

One overlooked aspect of the incumbent protection system is the array of campaign finance restrictions that have arisen since 1974. Limits on contributions help to protect incumbents from well-funded challengers. Eugene McCarthy's long-shot challenge to President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 would have been impossible without large contributions from anti-war businessmen. So what did the political establishment do? It prohibited large contributions.

Redistricting has become an effective tool for incumbent protection. With modern data and software, politicians have refined the gerrymandering process into an advanced science. Helped by court decisions that mandate exact mathematical equality for districts but give little weight to county lines and natural communities, they have carved out Rorschach-blot districts block by block to protect incumbents. A shift in the popular vote may not swing nearly as many districts as it used to. Districts used to choose representatives, now representatives choose their districts. And while partisanship plays a role, incumbent protection is increasingly more important. Describing the crucial California redistricting after the 2000 census, California Democratic chairman Art Torres said: "This really is a bipartisan effort. You maintain the 20 Republican seats."⁶⁰

In all these ways congressional incumbents protect themselves from the threat of challengers and thus reduce both the number of new people elected to office and their own need to reach new constituencies.

However, small national trends can matter a great deal in presidential elections. That is perhaps where the libertarian vote will matter most for the near future, and effective strategists will pay attention to it. Presidential candidates in 2008, and the campaign strategists and political pollsters who advise them, would do well to begin investigating the libertarian vote themselves. Pollsters at the major news agencies might investigate these trends coming out of the 2006 midterm election and into the 2008 season. More research needs to be done to find a single question that identifies the libertarian vote to simplify analysis. For now, we'd propose that the news agencies that commission the 2006 and 2008 exit polls consider including a question similar to one used to identify the religious right: "Do you consider yourself to be fiscally conservative and socially liberal, also known as libertarian?"

Technology may change some of this. Major polling companies such as Harris Interactive have made improvements in the accuracy of Internet probability sampling. This technology allows pollsters to draw very large samples at low cost.⁶¹ This would help pollsters understand smaller segments of the population, such as libertarians, with greater accuracy. Second, "microtargeting" is making it possible for political strategists to target voters ever more narrowly. Both parties have invested heavily in voter databases—the Republican National Committee in a database named Voter Vault, and the Democratic National Committee in a database named Datamart.⁶² Sophisticated data mining by both parties may turn up new strategies for looking in different ways at voters and groups of voters who have different lifestyles, values, and political views.

The best way to attract libertarian voters is not through microtargeting or better polling but through libertarian positions. Candidates who embrace both economic dynamism and social tolerance will be more appealing to libertarian voters. Candidates who offer a program of big-government spending and aggressive social conservatism will tend to drive away libertarians and libertarian-leaning centrists.

Presidential candidates in 2008, and the campaign strategists and political pollsters who advise them, would do well to begin investigating the libertarian vote.

The best way to attract libertarian voters is not through microtargeting or better polling but through libertarian positions.

More specifically, candidates who favor lower taxes, spending restraint, free trade, Social Security private accounts, reproductive choice, and a welcoming attitude toward working women, immigrants, and gays are going to find favor with libertarian voters. Candidates who support protectionism, tax increases, ever-expanding entitlement programs, and intrusions into personal freedoms will lose the libertarian vote.

At minimum, what this study proves is that the effort to search out to libertarian voters is worth the cost. The libertarian vote is knowable, understandable, and winnable. We've taken the first step. The candidates and political strategists willing to look more carefully at the electorate may find a large group of homeless voters looking for a home.

Appendix: A Note on Validity

As noted above, no survey of ideologies is definitive. Simple poll questions cannot adequately capture the nuances of any ideology. Intellectuals could quibble with the wording of all the questions. Certainly we do not claim that the “libertarians” these polls identify have read Ayn Rand or Robert Nozick. But we do think that the questions we have used are valid for identifying people who cannot fairly be classified as either “liberal” or “conservative” as those terms are understood in contemporary American politics. The screens identify Americans who fall outside the red-blue divide in a broadly libertarian direction, skeptical of government involvement in both economic and personal matters.

To check that claim, we performed a validity test on two groups of ideologically sophisticated respondents, employees of the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heritage Foundation. We asked each group to answer the nine questions drawn from the Gallup, ANES, and Pew surveys, along with several other questions from those surveys that we did not choose to use in our national screening. We also asked each respondent to

self-identify his or her own ideological position. Those tests confirmed that our questions are correctly separating libertarians from conservatives.

To make sure that the screens were not underinclusive—that is, that they were indeed identifying most actual libertarians in the sample—we surveyed interns and policy analysts at the Cato Institute, most of whom we assumed would be reasonably well-informed libertarians.⁶³

Cato respondents self-identified as follows:

87% libertarian
4% moderate
4% conservative
0% very conservative
4% not sure

- Using the libertarian screening questions from ANES, 26 of 37 (or 70 percent of) respondents would be “libertarian.” Those included 17 of 20 self-identified libertarians and did not include the one self-identified conservative.
- Using the libertarian screening questions from Gallup, 31 of 37 (or 84 percent of) respondents would be “libertarian.” Those included 18 of 20 self-identified libertarians and the one self-identified conservative.
- Using the libertarian screen question from Pew, 29 of 37 (or 78 percent of) respondents would be “libertarian.” Those included 18 of 20 self-identified libertarians and the one self-identified conservative.

All three screens did a reasonable job of capturing respondents who are known to be largely libertarian. Comparing the three screens, ANES may be slightly underinclusive compared to Gallup or Pew. That would mean ANES may slightly underestimate the libertarian vote share. (However, we find almost the same percentage using both ANES and Pew.)

To ensure that the screens were not overinclusive—that is, that they were not identifying as

libertarians people who are really conservative—we surveyed interns and analysts at the Heritage Foundation, most of whom we assumed would be well-informed conservatives.⁶⁴

Heritage respondents self-identified as follows:

- 14% libertarian
- 9% moderate
- 55% conservative
- 21% very conservative
- 2% not sure

- Using the libertarian screening questions from ANES, 31 of 106 (or 29 percent of) Heritage respondents would be “libertarian.” Those include 10 of 15 (or 66 percent of) self-identified libertarians, 5 of 22 self-identified very conservative, 14 of 57 conservatives, and 2 of 9 moderates.
- Using the libertarian screening questions from Gallup, 28 of 106 (or 26 percent of) respondents would be “libertarian.” Those include 14 of 15 self-identified libertarians, 3 of 22 very conservative, 7 of 57 conservatives, 3 of 9 moderates, and 1 of 2 “not sure.”
- Using the libertarian screen question from Pew, 36 of 106 (or 34 percent of) respondents would be “libertarian.” Those include 14 of 15 self-identified libertarians, 3 of 22 very conservative, 15 of 57 conservatives, 3 of 9 moderates, and 1 of 2 not sure.

Our three-question screens are slightly under-inclusive from the Cato test, and slightly over-inclusive from the Heritage test. On net, we collect a few more self-identified conservatives than we lose self-identified libertarians. Among the data sets, Gallup questions seem to work best. ANES is slightly more over-inclusive. Pew is slightly more over-inclusive than that.

Among the Heritage Foundation respondents, the screens identify almost all libertarians, exclude almost all “very conservative” respondents, but include some conservatives. Perhaps this is a definitional issue for the poli-

cy scholars, or perhaps for the Heritage interns the word “libertarian” is unfamiliar or undesirable. If the latter is the case, we should expect to get more people to self-identify as conservative when they are really more libertarian.

Do more questions or a different set of questions do a better job? No, we found that adding more questions on specific topics such as the Patriot Act, homosexuality, or family values did not add much to the reliability of the results. Thus we continued to use the broader questions to screen respondents to the national polls. On balance, we believe these results confirm the validity of our results from Gallup, Pew, and ANES.

Notes

The authors wish to thank Isaac Freilich Jones for indispensable data crunching.

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Candidates and political strategists may find a large group of homeless voters looking for a home.

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 28. The observed increase in the libertarian vote from 1992 to 2004 is significant at a 99 percent confidence level (t-stat = 3.559).
 29. Using a two-tailed t-test, a statistical test used to compare changes across two samples, we can say the observed libertarian swing between 2000 and 2004 is significant at a 99 percent confidence level (t-stat = 3.0136).
 30. Using Pew data—which employed a different callback methodology in 2004—we find that a majority of libertarians voted for Kerry, 56 to 44. However, Pew did not conduct the survey in the 2000 election, so Pew data do not permit a trend analysis to confirm the trend observed in the ANES data.
 31. ANES researchers grouped terrorism responses to include “terrorist bombings/hostage-taking; political subversives; revolutionary ideas/approaches; Homeland Security mentions; the war against Al Qaeda; Islamic terrorists or extremists.”

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40. The observed libertarian U.S. House swing between 2000 and 2004 is significant at a 99 percent confidence level (t-stat = 3.3077).
41. Using a two-tailed t-test, a statistical test used to compare changes across two samples, we can say the observed libertarian U.S. Senate swing between 2000 and 2004 is significant at a 99 percent confidence level (t-score stat = 3.2348). While those data do not permit a district-by-district analysis, we note that libertarians are spread across the United States, with strong concentrations in the West. Using our methodology, researchers could further refine our analysis for presidential battleground states or other contested states and districts.
42. There is some controversy about the proper way to calculate voter turnout. The U.S. Census calculates voter turnout using "voting-age population." However, this includes ineligible voters such as felons. George Mason University scholar Michael P. McDonald calculates voter turnout using the "voting eligible population," which increases the percentage of voters nationally. See http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.
43. ANES overreporting of voting is a well-known bias in political science. When ANES researchers conduct postelection interviews, many more respondents claim to have voted than actually vote. There are questions as to whether this bias affects Republicans or Democrats unevenly and whether the voting behavior of overreporting voters is significantly different from that of actual voters. ANES has undertaken extensive validity tests to go back to state, county, and municipal voter rolls to validate whether respondents who said they voted actually voted. But these tests have proved inconclusive. If anything, ANES overreporting is likely to bias estimates towards the election winner, Bush. This would mean that any bias would likely underestimate the observed trend of libertarian voters away from Bush.
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63. We received 37 responses from our sample population of about 65 Cato policy scholars and interns. This gave us an error rate of 8.6 percent at $p = .10$, 10.6 percent at $p = .5$. Not every respondent who began the survey completed it. Only 23 respondents answered the last question about ideology: 20 self-identified as libertarian, 1 as conservative, 1 as liberal, and 1 as progressive. Not every person answered every question in the survey. Some respondents skipped particular questions, presumably objecting to the question design.

64. We received 106 responses from our sample population of about 150 Heritage policy scholars and interns. This gave us an error rate of 5.2 percent at $p = .5$.

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