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## *The Libertarian Vote in the Age of Obama*

by David Kirby and David Boaz

### Executive Summary

Libertarian—or fiscally conservative, socially liberal—voters are often torn between their aversions to the Republicans’ social conservatism and the Democrats’ fiscal irresponsibility. Yet libertarians rarely factor into pundits’ and pollsters’ analyses.

In 2004 libertarians swung away from Bush, anticipating the Democratic victories of 2006. In 2008, according to new data in this paper, libertarians voted against Barack Obama. Libertarians seem to be a lead indicator of trends in centrist, independent-minded voters. If libertarians continue to lead the independents away from Obama, Democrats will lose 2010 midterm elections they would otherwise win.

We find that 14 percent of American voters can be classified as libertarian. Other surveys find a larger number of people who hold views that are neither consistently liberal nor conservative but are best described as libertarian. A 2009 Gallup poll found that 23 percent held libertarian views. A Zogby poll found that 59 percent considered themselves “fiscally conservative and

socially liberal,” and 44 percent agreed that they were “fiscally conservative and socially liberal, also known as libertarian.”

Libertarians shifted back to the Republican column in 2008, supporting John McCain over Barack Obama by 71 to 27 percent. Although many libertarian intellectuals had a real antipathy to McCain, the typical libertarian voter saw McCain as an independent, straight-talking maverick who was a strong opponent of earmarks and pork-barrel spending and never talked about social issues. Also, the prospect of a Democratic president working with a Democratic majority in Congress at the height of a financial crisis scared libertarian voters.

Younger libertarians were more supportive of Obama. Pro-life libertarians are more Republican than pro-choice libertarians.

Few of the voters we describe as libertarian identify themselves as such. But the Ron Paul campaign and the burgeoning opposition to President Obama’s big-government agenda suggest that small-government voters may be easier to organize than they have been in the past.

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## Introduction

“I’ve been here for 37 years. . . . There’s very little new, really new, that ever takes place. But I’m seeing something in the Republican Party that I’ve never seen in either Party. And that is you’ve got a core base of the Party that detests the opposition leader and the entire agenda of the Democratic Party. But at the same time, they have total contempt of their own Party’s leadership and establishment.”

—Charlie Cook, radio interview,  
October 28, 2009<sup>1</sup>

Pundits are baffled. After an election victory billed as “historic,” many expected President Obama to translate the hope of his campaign into a new consensus in politics. The *New York Times* editorialized that Obama’s election would forge a “broad political consensus.”<sup>2</sup> David Gergen describes Obama as a “consensus-seeking” politician.<sup>3</sup> Yet in nine months, we’ve witnessed increasing anger toward Obama and his administration’s continuation of the Bush-era policies of takeovers, bailouts, federal spending, and the extension of federal control. Citizens have staged “Tea Party” protests, shouted down members of Congress at town hall meetings, and marched on Washington.

So much for consensus. As early as July, polls detected that centrists and independents were moving away from the Democratic Party.<sup>4</sup> From January to October, Gallup data show that independents’ job approval of Obama has dropped 16 points, from 62 to 46 percent.<sup>5</sup> In the 2009 gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey, independents swung away from Democrats according to CNN exit polls. In Virginia, independents voted for Republican Bob McDonnell 66 to 33 percent,<sup>6</sup> a 34-point swing from 2008 when independents voted for Obama 49 to 48 percent.<sup>7</sup> In New Jersey, independents voted for Republican Chris Christie 60 to 30 percent,<sup>8</sup> a 34-point swing from 2008 when independents voted for Obama 51 to 47.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there are few Americans who like the Republicans. An October NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll showed that only 25 percent have a positive opinion of the Republican Party, tying the survey’s all-time low.<sup>10</sup>

In 2008 we were told that Obama would forge consensus. In the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, we were told that we’re a polarized nation, sharply split between “red team” Republicans and “blue team” Democrats. But entering 2010, the nation doesn’t seem to want to be part of any team at all.

A standard question for pollsters is, “How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” In the NBC/*Wall Street Journal* survey, the answers were not encouraging for incumbent politicians or people who want the federal government to take on sweeping new obligations. Just 4 percent said they trust the government “just about always” while 19 percent said “most of the time.” The overwhelming majority, 65 percent, said they trust the government “only some of the time.”<sup>11</sup> An unprecedented 11 percent of respondents volunteered—this option wasn’t asked—that they “never” trust the government.<sup>12</sup> No doubt some of those mistrusting voters are libertarians.

A closer look at ideology reveals that these two ideas—of polarization and consensus—were both based on a misdiagnosis of public opinion. Libertarian—or fiscally conservative, socially liberal—voters are often torn between their aversions to the Republicans’ social conservatism and the Democrats’ fiscal irresponsibility. Yet libertarians rarely factor into pundits’ and pollsters’ analyses. Polls show that libertarians are 10 to 20 percent of voters and a key swing vote.

In 2004 libertarians swung away from George W. Bush, anticipating the Democratic victories of 2006. In 2008, according to new data, libertarians voted against Barack Obama. Libertarians seem to be a lead indicator of trends in centrist, independent-minded voters. Libertarians’ concerns about Republican overspending, government growth, excessive social conservatism, and the war in Iraq prompted them to move away from Bush in 2004, earlier

than other independents did. Before the 2006 elections, we predicted that if the swing away from the Republicans continued, “Republicans will lose elections they would otherwise win.”<sup>13</sup> Now we offer the reverse prediction: libertarians were more skeptical in 2008 about Obama’s big-government agenda, but now those concerns are widespread among moderates and independents. If libertarians continue to lead the independents away from Obama, Democrats will lose 2010 midterm elections they would otherwise win.

If there’s something new in American politics, as Charlie Cook observes, perhaps it is a shift away from partisan loyalties and a generational shift away from old issues and old alliances. Pundits often refer to the “conservative base” as the Republican Party’s core voters, motivated by a collection of issues: taxes, family issues, abortion, national security, military strength, and American values. Political leaders such as Mike Huckabee and Sarah Palin, and media hosts such as Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, are icons of that conservative base. But perhaps there is a new group of voters emerging around a different set of issues: spending, mistrust of government, government control, and social tolerance. While the conservative base remains more loyal to the Republican Party, these more libertarian voters are angry with Republicans, even if libertarians often vote for them as the lesser of two evils. What will be the impact of this emerging electorate? We now have more data to answer that question.

## America’s Libertarian Voters

Millions of people don’t fit the liberal-conservative dichotomy. They may be fiscally conservative and socially liberal (or tolerant); that is, broadly libertarian. Or they may be liberal on economic issues and conservative on issues of personal freedom, and we might call them statist or populist. Either way they don’t fit neatly into the liberal or conservative box, and they often find themselves torn

between conservative Republican and liberal Democratic candidates for office.

Many years of polls show that 10 to 20 percent—or more—of Americans fall into the libertarian quadrant. Indeed, libertarians are a bigger share of the electorate than the much discussed “soccer moms” of the 1990s or “NASCAR dads” of the early 2000s, and bigger than many of the microtargeted groups pursued by political strategists in the 2004 and 2008 elections.<sup>14</sup> Libertarians are increasingly a swing vote. Through the Bush years, Republicans expanded entitlements and spent taxpayers’ money faster than Democrats, giving libertarians less reason to stick with their traditional voting patterns. Polls in 2004 and 2006 showed that libertarian voters shifted toward the Democrats, and they may well have cost Republicans control of Congress.<sup>15</sup> But 2008 brought a return to the Republican Party, as the prospect of a liberal Democrat mismanaging the largest financial crisis in decades made libertarians retreat to the market-friendly rhetoric of John McCain.

Why is this substantial and growing libertarian strength not better recognized? Political scientists have taught for more than 50 years that politics is arranged on a liberal-conservative continuum, so we’re all used to that. And indeed, political activists and elected officials do seem to have arranged themselves into those two camps, rather than a more accurate reflection of the total electorate. Because of the constant repetition of the liberal-conservative spectrum, most libertarian-minded voters don’t identify themselves as libertarians, and they aren’t organized in libertarian groups. But it’s time for pundits, pollsters, and politicians to pay more attention to the libertarian vote.

## Libertarians Today

Libertarian voters do exist, and new poll data help us to discover them. Some pollsters use one or more questions on both economic and social issues to categorize respondents as liberal, conservative, libertarian, or pop-

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**We selected three questions about political attitudes—a stricter screen than most analysts use—and found that libertarians made up 14 percent of voters in 2008.**

**Table 1  
Libertarians as Percentage of Electorate**

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008
Libertarians as % of voting-age population	9	9	11	13	13	12
Libertarians as % of reported voters		12	12	14	15	14

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

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

ulist. Other polls provide sufficient data to allow us to perform such calculations ourselves.

The best picture of libertarian voters comes from the generally acknowledged gold standard of public opinion data, the surveys of the American National Election Studies. As discussed in our 2006 paper “The Libertarian Vote,” our main data source has been the ANES Time Series data from post-election surveys. We selected three questions about political attitudes—a stricter screen than most analysts use—and found that libertarians made up 14 percent of voters in 2008, about the same as 2004. The questions we used were these:

- 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?)

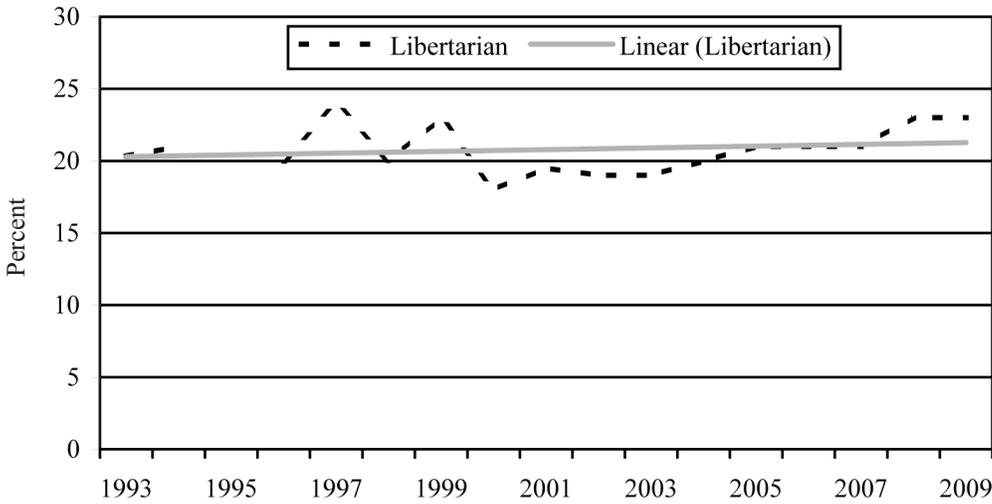
Only those respondents who said “the less government, the better,” “the free market can handle these problems,” and strongly agreed or agreed that “we should be more tolerant” were classified as libertarian. The results we found using those three questions to screen respondents over the past 20 years are shown in Table 1.

Other analysts have found even larger groups of libertarians in the electorate. For more than a dozen years now, the Gallup poll has been using two broad questions to categorize respondents by ideology about economic and social freedom:

- 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 these two questions, Gallup consistently finds about 20 percent of respondents to be libertarian. In 2009 they found 23 percent libertarians, along with 18 percent liberals, 19 percent populists,

**Figure 1**  
**Libertarians in the Electorate**



Source: Gallup Polls.

and 31 percent conservatives (9 percent were unclassifiable).

The number of libertarians may be on the rise. Gallup’s calculations show a slight upward trend, in particular a rise in recent years from a dip in the early 2000s, which was perhaps a reflection of the briefly renewed confidence in government after the 9/11 attacks.

In a 2008–2009 panel study, ANES asked these questions:

- Do you think the U.S. federal government should have more effect on Americans’ lives than it does now, less effect, or about the same amount of effect that it has now on Americans’ lives?
- Do you think the U.S. federal government should do more to influence how businesses operate in this country, should the federal government do less to influence businesses, or should the government do about what it’s doing now to influence businesses?<sup>16</sup>

If we define “libertarian” as those who believe that the federal government should have less effect on Americans’ lives *and* do less to influence businesses, we get 25 percent of voters—

slightly higher than Gallup’s 23 percent in 2008.

In 2007 a *Washington Post*–ABC News poll asked these two questions (among many others):

- “Generally speaking, would you say you favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with more services?” Smaller government won by 50 to 44 percent.
- “Do you think homosexual couples should or should not be allowed to form legally recognized civil unions, giving them the legal rights of married couples in areas such as health insurance, inheritance and pension coverage?” Respondents said they should, by 55 to 42 percent.<sup>17</sup>

So if you take support for smaller government as an indicator of libertarian-conservative sentiment, and support for civil unions as an indicator of libertarian-liberal sentiment, then the libertarian position got a small majority on both questions. We can use those two questions to construct a four-way ideological matrix. We categorize the responses this way:

**Gallup consistently finds about 20 percent of respondents to be libertarian. In 2009 they found 23 percent to be libertarian.**

**By 59 to 27 percent, poll respondents said they would describe themselves as “fiscally conservative and socially liberal.”**

Roughly speaking, libertarians support smaller government and civil unions. Conservatives support smaller government and oppose civil unions. Liberals support larger government and civil unions. And the fourth group—variously called statist, populists, or maybe just anti-libertarians—support larger government and oppose civil unions. Thus we find that on these two questions 26 percent of the respondents are libertarians, 26 percent liberals, 23 percent conservatives, and 17 percent anti-libertarians (see Figure 2).

Finally, we commissioned Zogby International to ask our three ANES questions to 1,012 actual (reported) voters in the 2006 election. Once again, we found that 15 percent of voters could be defined as libertarian on our three-question screen. Zogby asked respondents to characterize their own ideology and included “libertarian” as a choice, which very few such polls do. Only 9 percent of the voters we identified as libertarian identified them-

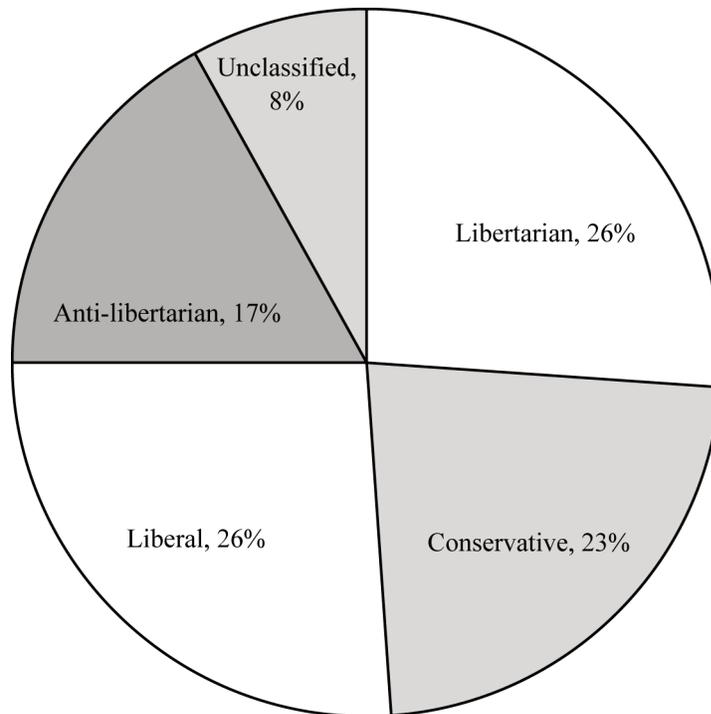
selves as libertarians; 50 percent said “conservative” or “very conservative,” and 31 percent said “moderate.”<sup>18</sup>

But we also asked a new question. We asked half the sample, “Would you describe yourself as fiscally conservative and socially liberal?” We asked the other half of the respondents, “Would you describe yourself as fiscally conservative and socially liberal, also known as libertarian?”

The results surprised us. Fully 59 percent of the respondents said “yes” to the first question. That is, by 59 to 27 percent, poll respondents said they would describe themselves as “fiscally conservative and socially liberal.”

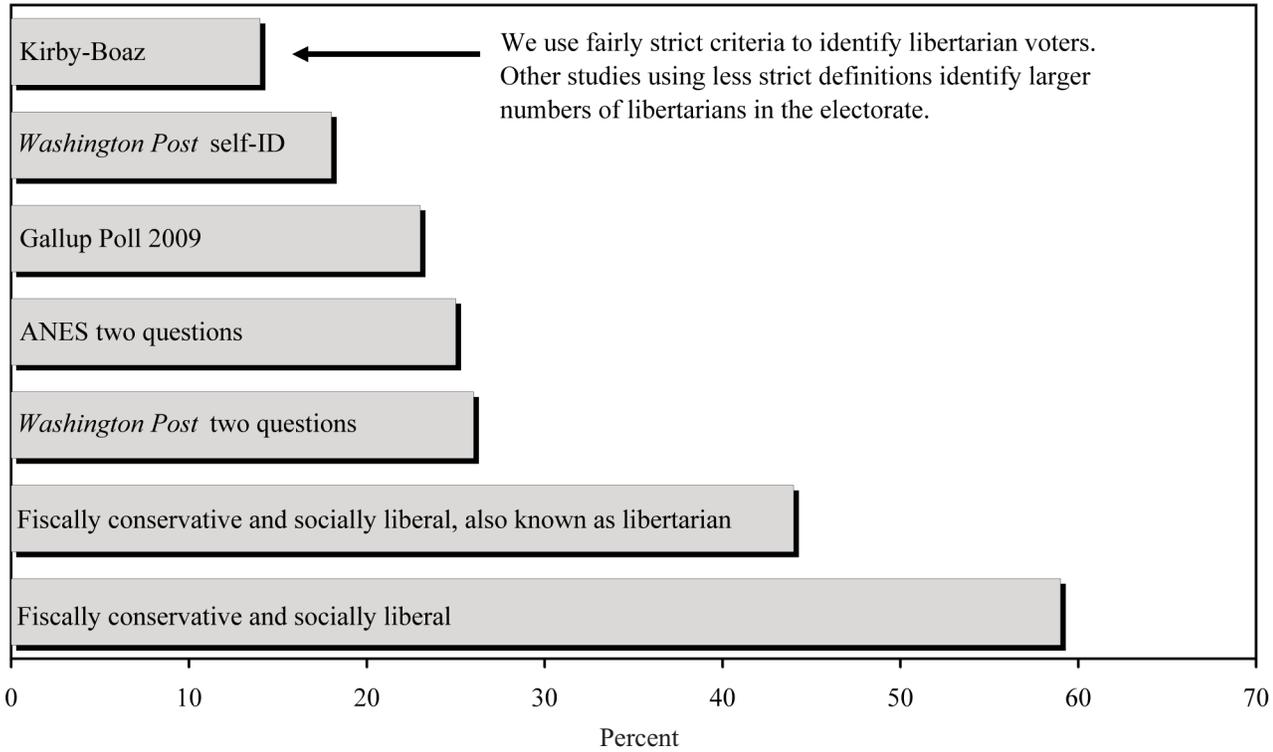
The addition of the word “libertarian” clearly made the question more challenging. What surprised us was how small the drop-off was. A healthy 44 percent of respondents answered “yes” to that question, accepting a self-description as “libertarian.”

**Figure 2**  
**Ideological Groups in *Washington Post*-ABC News Poll, 2007**



Source: Calculations provided by Jon Cohen from “*Washington Post*-ABC News Poll,” *Washington Post*, November 4, 2007, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll\\_110407.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll_110407.html).

**Figure 3**  
**How Many Libertarians Are There?**



Surely that question is overinclusive. Still, it's encouraging that 59 percent of Americans think they lean in a libertarian direction on both economic and social issues and that 44 percent are willing to be described as libertarian.

### A Swing Vote?

So how do libertarians vote? That's the bottom line for candidates and consultants. We find good evidence not only that libertarians exist and that they vote, but that their votes have been in flux. Libertarians are not firmly committed to either party.

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 ANES data, we find that libertarians have voted heavily Republican in recent presidential elections,

but with interesting variations. In 1988, with a choice between George H. W. Bush's watered-down Reaganism and Michael Dukakis's combination of big-government orthodoxy and social liberalism, libertarians voted 74 to 26 percent 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, Democratic nominee Bill Clinton, and third-party candidate Ross Perot, who railed against deficit spending and steered clear of social issues. That suggests that the libertarian affinity for Republicans is easily broken. Libertarians also gave a high percentage of their votes to third-party candidates in 1980 (independent John B. Anderson and Libertar-

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ian Party candidate Ed Clark) and 1996 (again Perot).

It would thus be a mistake to consider libertarians a reliable part of the “Republican base.” The election of 2004 saw a dramatic swing away from the Republicans, with libertarian support for Bush dropping from 72 to 59 percent, while support for the Democratic nominee almost doubled to 38 percent.<sup>19</sup> The Republican margin among libertarians dropped from 52 to 21 points. A look at Bush’s record on war, spending, entitlements, and social issues easily explains this shifting alliance—though Sen. John F. Kerry offered little for libertarians other than “not Bush.”

This weakened support for Republicans lasted into the 2006 congressional elections. In the Zogby survey, 59 percent of libertarians voted for Republican candidates for Congress, and 26 percent voted for Democrats. Comparing those results to the previous off-year election in 2002, we find a 24 point swing to the Democrats. That is, libertarians voted for Republican congressional candidates by a margin of 47 percentage points in 2002 and only 23 points in 2006.

ANES data show an even stronger swing away from Republicans from 2002 to 2006.

As depicted in Table 2, the margin for Republican House candidates among libertarians dropped from 47 to 8 points, a 39-point swing. (Note: ANES changed the wording of its question in 2006 so that votes for third-party or independent candidates were not recorded.) Among libertarians, the margin for Republican Senate candidates dropped from 59 to 4 points over that period, a 55-point swing.<sup>20</sup>

### Swinging Away from the Democrats

The anti-Republican swing stopped in 2008, however. Our review of ANES data shows that 66 percent of libertarians voted for Republican House candidates that year, while only 30 percent voted Democratic. The numbers show an even larger return swing in the Senate, with 73 percent voting Republican compared to 22 percent Democratic.

The bigger story is the presidential election. According to the 2008 ANES Panel study, 71 percent of libertarians voted for John McCain. Only 27 percent cast their vote for Barack Obama. In other words, the 2008 election showed a return to a strongly pro-

**Table 2**  
**How Libertarians Voted for U.S. House and Senate, 2000–2008 (percent)**

		2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	Swing potential
House	Democratic candidate	23	23	44	46	30	±23
	Republican candidate	73	70	53	54	66	±20
	Independent/ Third party/ Other candidate	4	6	3			
Senate	Democratic candidate	23	15	43	48	22	±33
	Republican candidate	73	74	54	52	73	±22
	Independent/ Third party/ Other candidate	4	10	4			

Source: Authors’ calculations from ANES Panel and Time Series data.

**Table 3**  
**How Libertarians Voted for President, 1988–2008 (percent)**

	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	Swing Potential
Democratic candidate	26	32	29	20	38	27	±18
Republican candidate	74	35	58	72	59	71	±39
Third-party candidates	0	33	13	8	3		±33

Source: Authors' calculations from ANES data.

**Table 4**  
**Libertarian Voters Party ID (percent)**

	2000	2004	2008
Democratic	10	16	15
Republican	46	33	53
Independent	32	46	26
Other party/No preference	12	5	6

Source: Authors' calculations from ANES 2000, 2004, and 2008 Time Series data.

Republican—or anti-Democratic—libertarian vote.<sup>21</sup>

Why would libertarians swing so strongly back to the Republicans after years of declining support? After all, libertarian intellectuals had a real antipathy to McCain.<sup>22</sup> One possibility is that to the typical libertarian voter, McCain seemed like an independent, straight-talking maverick who was a strong opponent of earmarks and pork-barrel spending, never talked about social issues, and in fact had hostile relations with the religious right that drew headlines in 2000. Indeed, libertarians had warmer feelings toward McCain than Bush in 2008, rating McCain an average of 63 to Bush's 52 on a 100-point "feeling thermometer" scale.

Also, it makes sense to conclude that economic issues mattered more in November 2008 than in 2004 and 2006. Barack Obama was promising more spending, more regulation, and more taxes at a time of financial crisis. Libertarians naturally preferred McCain's campaign rhetoric about spending restraint and his charge that his Democratic opponent would move the country toward "socialism." The prospect of a Democratic president work-

ing with a Democratic majority in Congress at the height of a financial crisis scared libertarian voters in a way that John Kerry didn't.<sup>23</sup>

However, the libertarian vote for McCain should not be misinterpreted as enthusiasm for Republicans. While 53 percent of ANES 2008 libertarians identify as Republican when asked for party affiliation, they do so only weakly. Of Republican libertarian voters, 45 percent said their party identification was "not very strong."

This lack of party loyalty was readily apparent in responses given by libertarians after the presidential election. When asked whether they considered voting for someone else, almost half of libertarian McCain supporters (43 percent) said yes. And when asked who they considered voting for, 58 percent said a third party candidate. Perhaps this weak support for Republican leaders in 2008 was an early indicator of the anger or "contempt" toward the Republican establishment that Charlie Cook describes today.

But this does not tell the whole story. A significant portion of libertarian voters, the youngest voters, did not punch their ballots for John McCain.

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## **The Youth Vote**

Political analysts and strategists have made much of young people's excitement for Obama in the 2008 election. According to exit polls, the 18- to 29-year-old age group voted for Obama by a 34-point margin, 66 percent to 32 percent. In a report on the "Obama Generation," James Carville and pollster Stan Greenberg compared Obama's gains to Ronald Reagan's capture of the youth vote in the 1980s. They warn that, for Republicans, it may be "too late for this generation."<sup>24</sup>

In a paper for the left-leaning Center for American Progress on the "millennial generation," researchers David Madland and Ruy Teixeira argue that behind young people's support for Obama there is a "deeper story of a generation with progressive views in all areas and big expectations for change that will fundamentally reshape our electorate."<sup>25</sup> They predict a progressive realignment, with young people tipping the country's politics toward the center-left and away from the center-right consensus.

However, a careful look at the ideology of young people gives us reason to doubt these strong pronouncements about generational realignment. Young people defy easy ideological categorization. As we discuss below, polling data indicate that there is a large bloc of young people who can be fairly described as libertarian. These libertarians voted for Obama in larger numbers than older generations of libertarians. According to a survey commissioned by the Center for American Progress, younger libertarians voted 59 percent for Obama versus 36 percent for McCain.<sup>26</sup> But their enthusiasm for his policies may be short-lived.

### **The Secular Centrist Vote**

In spring 2004, researchers at Harvard's Institute for Politics realized that young people "did not break down on a traditional left-right spectrum."<sup>27</sup> In 2006 Harvard researchers wrote that "political groupings among college students are much more complicated

than 'blue' and 'red.' Party identification is misleading, antiquated and only tells a small part about the beliefs of an individual."<sup>28</sup> Instead, they attempted to divide young people using two spectrums: a traditional liberal-conservative spectrum and a religious-secular spectrum. In 2004 researchers broke young people into four categories: traditional liberals (32 percent), traditional conservatives (16 percent), religious centrists (23 percent), and secular centrists (29 percent).

Among Harvard's categories, "secular centrists" may be the best proxy for libertarian beliefs.<sup>29</sup> Compared to other categories, secular centrists are more fiscally conservative and more socially liberal. In 2004 this was the second largest ideological category—and almost twice the size of traditional conservatives. Ideologically, secular centrists don't fit neatly into the left-right spectrum. While a majority (58 percent) supported the war in Iraq, they also strongly favor gay rights (including gay marriage), believe strongly in separation of church and state, generally disfavor affirmative action and environmental protection laws, and are less likely than most to see health insurance as a basic right.

Secular centrists were evenly divided during the presidential election of 2004 (42 percent Bush, 41 percent Kerry). They were also the least likely to vote, with only 55 percent saying they would definitely be voting. Secular centrists did not show any party allegiance, with 25 percent identifying as Democrat, 21 percent Republican, 50 percent independent, and 2 percent other.

By spring 2008, this ideological group of secular centrists had grown to 42 percent of young Americans.<sup>30</sup> They differed greatly in their opinions toward Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. For example, in a three-way race between Obama, McCain, and Ralph Nader, secular centrists preferred Obama to McCain by only 2 points, 37 percent to 35 percent. Twenty-four percent were undecided. When Hillary Clinton was matched against John McCain, McCain won handily, 41 percent to 27 percent. This is a 16-point difference between Obama and Clinton. The data

seem to show an affinity for Obama rather than allegiance to Democrats.

### **Obama and the Millennial Generation**

Harvard's data tell a story consistent with other data. According to the CAP data on the millennial generation, younger libertarians voted 59 percent for Obama versus 36 percent for McCain.<sup>31</sup> Who are these young voters? In a paper for the New America Foundation, researchers Neil Howe and Reena Nadler identify the millennial generation as the generation born since 1982 and describe its traits. Raised by very involved parents, millennials view themselves as special. They are high achievers, confident in their abilities to perform and do good—perhaps overconfident. They are optimistic. They are traditionalist in the sense that they are more likely to embrace, rather than rebel against, their parents' values. Millennials are also impatient. They tend to be sheltered, having been shielded by a generation of careful parenting.<sup>32</sup>

Obama might have been the perfect candidate for such a generation of optimistic achievers. His campaign motto "Yes We Can" hit pop-culture resonance when musician will.i.am made a video cutting Obama's New Hampshire primary-night address into lyrics performed by will.i.am and almost 40 other actors, celebrities, and athletes, including John Legend, Scarlett Johansson, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Herbie Hancock, and Nick Cannon. Millions of young people watched on YouTube and other video sites. Given Republicans' image as tone-deaf on pop culture, Obama certainly offered young people something exciting to support.

However, while young people supported Obama personally and were excited by his candidacy, that does not always translate into agreement on the issues. For instance, when the Center for American Progress asked whether "Social Security should be reformed to allow workers to invest some of their contributions in individual accounts," young people agreed, averaging 6.7 on a 0–10 scale (with 10 meaning completely agree and 0 meaning completely disagree). Young libertarians aver-

aged 7.5. When asked whether "free trade is good for America because it creates new markets for our goods and services and lowers costs for consumers," young people agreed, averaging 6.8, while young libertarians averaged 7.5. When asked whether "cutting taxes for individuals and businesses is the key to economic growth," young people agreed, averaging 5.9, while young libertarians averaged 6.5. These are not positions consistent with the Obama administration or the Democratic Party.

### **Will Younger Voters Sour on Obama?**

Younger Americans are an optimistic generation, but easily shaken when things go badly. If unemployment continues to remain weak, an economic issue that disproportionately affects young people, this generation of voters could quickly become disillusioned with Obama's policies.

We witnessed this pattern among young people after 9/11. It may be hard to remember, but post 9/11, younger voters supported President Bush at levels similar to their later support for President Obama. According to Harvard's Institute of Politics surveys, in 2003 George W. Bush's approval rating among voters aged 18–29 was 61 percent. Support for the war in Iraq outpaced opposition by more than 2 to 1 among young people, and hard-core support outnumbered hard-core opposition by nearly 3 to 1. For many young people, 9/11 was a call to public service.

When the war turned in Iraq, young people's opinions quickly changed. Many knew friends or college classmates who were wounded or killed in Iraq. For a generation that grew up in a time of relative peace, this reality struck particularly hard. By fall 2006, according to Harvard data, 67 percent of young Americans disapproved of the job of George W. Bush, and 79 percent believed the United States should withdraw its troops. This was almost a complete reversal of opinion in a little more than two years.

Young people may be similarly overconfident in Obama's ability to deliver, and particularly susceptible to disappointment and dis-

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illusionment. Indeed, at his election the expectations for Obama couldn't have been higher. Even Chicago-based comedy troupe Second City, in a recent show called “Barack Stars,” poked fun at young people's inflated expectations, singing how Obama would make puppies rain from the sky and turn guns into gumdrops.<sup>33</sup>

College-educated young people, who believe themselves to be special, have come to expect a world of limitless opportunities—good jobs, technological innovation, and stability. However, many college graduates can't find jobs and are moving back home with parents after college. Unemployment stands at 25.1 percent among young people aged 16–19 and 15.1 percent among young people aged 20–24.<sup>34</sup> This has shaken young people's confidence.

At the least, Obama's magic seems to be waning with young people. In the gubernatorial election in Virginia, turnout among voters aged 18–29 fell by half from 2008. The young voters who showed up voted 54 to 44 for Republican McDonnell, after having voted 60 to 40 percent for candidate Obama the previous fall, a 30-point shift.<sup>35</sup> The trend doesn't seem to be isolated to Virginia. According to Gallup data, Obama's approval rating shows a nationwide drop among young people, from 75 in January to 63 in November.<sup>36</sup> While a 63-percent approval rating is relatively strong in historical terms, there nonetheless is a spreading disillusionment, a sentiment we suspect is felt strongest by the libertarian-leaning young people who voted for Obama. Young libertarians who voted for Obama show the weakest partisanship, and are most out of sync with him on the issues. These young people will be the most likely to defect and the ones to watch in the 2010 elections.

### **Rounding Out the Picture of Libertarian Voters**

As more scholars, pollsters, and journalists take note of libertarian voters, we have opportunities to get a more rounded picture of this

part of the electorate. We know from regular surveys that libertarians tend to be younger, more affluent, more educated, and to vote at higher rates than the general public.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Ron Paul Voters**

Given the excitement generated in 2007–2008 by the presidential candidacy of the libertarian-leaning Ron Paul, it's worthwhile to examine what little data we have about his supporters. In the 2008–2009 ANES Panel data, we find that Paul supporters were by no means loyal Republicans in the general election that fall. According to ANES, of those respondents who voted for Paul in the Republican primary, only 38 percent voted for John McCain in November, with 24 percent supporting Obama, and 33 percent “other.” In other words, Republicans lost almost two-thirds of the people who voted for Paul in the GOP primaries.

Among respondents who “liked” Paul, 55 percent voted for McCain, 40 percent for Obama, and only 5 percent for other candidates. The more a voter liked Paul, the less likely he was to vote Republican in the general election: respondents who liked Paul “a great deal” voted 44 percent for McCain, 38 percent for Obama, and 17 percent “other.” This phenomenon may be tied largely to feelings about the Iraq war. Sixty-three percent of respondents who liked Paul believed the United States should not have sent troops into Iraq in 2003, an opinion that Paul and Obama shared but that McCain did not.

#### **Abortion**

Abortion is an issue that has great potential to rend political coalitions. Over the past 30 years there has been a strong shift toward consistent conservative opposition to legalized abortion, and consistent liberal support. Where do libertarians stand? Most commentary about libertarian voters assumes that they are pro-choice. Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and the Libertarian Party have all taken firmly pro-choice stands. A 2008 poll of readers of *Liberty* magazine, a small, radical libertarian magazine, found that 42.5 percent believed

**Table 5**  
**How Libertarian Positions on Abortion Affected the Presidential Vote**

	1972–1988 (percent)	GOP margin (percent)	1992–2008 (percent)	GOP margin (percent)
Abortion should be				
<i>Never allowed</i>	4.3	49.6	5.8	24.9
<i>Rarely allowed</i>	32.2	40.7	21.3	31.4
<i>Allowed only if clear need</i>	21.2	43.9	16.5	10.8
<i>Woman's choice</i>	42.2	29.8	56.5	-22.1

Source: Sylvia Friedel, “Libertarians, Abortion, and Presidential Voting,” UCLA Political Science Department, Fall 2009, unpublished, Table 3, from ANES data 1972–2008, weights applied.

that abortion is wrong but only 8.7 percent believed it should be illegal.<sup>38</sup> However, some libertarian intellectuals are pro-life, and there certainly are self-identified libertarians who protest the assumption that libertarians are pro-choice. In our observation, pro-life and pro-choice libertarians are usually able to see the libertarian values in the opposing position—“a woman’s right to control her body” versus “the government’s responsibility to protect life, liberty, and property”—better than liberals and conservatives can, and so the issue has not been divisive within the formal libertarian movement.

According to our analysis of 2008 ANES data, 62 percent of libertarians are pro-choice versus 37 percent pro-life, similar to percentages of the national population.<sup>39</sup> This is surprising for a bloc of voters who support Republicans at 70 percent levels in many elections. Interestingly, a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll in November found that 61 percent of respondents said that health insurance paid for with government assistance should not include abortion coverage, while 35 percent said it should. But 56 percent believed that insurance paid for with private funds should include abortion coverage, while only 43 percent said it should not. Thus about 20 percent of respondents would support abortion coverage if it was entirely private, but would object to government funding of abortion—a libertarian sort of reasoning, and a percentage in the range of our estimates of the libertarian electorate.<sup>40</sup>

UCLA political scientist Sylvia Friedel found that the abortion issue could explain some variations in libertarian voting.<sup>41</sup> Friedel used ANES data from 1972 to 2008 to identify libertarian voters. Rather than the values questions we used in our screen, she used responses to issue questions about welfare spending, guaranteed jobs, and federal spending on the economic dimension, and equal rights for women and three gay-rights questions on the social dimension. Demographically, her libertarians—20 percent of the total sample—are somewhat more female, younger, and more Democratic-identified than our group, and they vote less heavily for Republicans. She argues that the abortion issue became more salient for voters, and more sharply defined between the parties, over time, and in particular that abortion became a defining issue for the Republican Party in 1992 and thereafter. Thus she examines how libertarians with differing views on abortion voted in 1972–1988 and in 1992–2008.

In the five presidential elections from 1972 to 1988, Friedel found that libertarians voted Republican 68.5 percent of the time. But in the five elections from 1992 to 2008, they voted only 46 percent Republican. Abortion appears to have played a big role in the shift.

According to Table 5, about two-thirds of libertarians took one of the pro-choice positions in the earlier era, and about three-fourths in the latter years. While all the libertarians voted less solidly Republican in the later years, pro-choice libertarians shifted more sharply.

**According to ANES, of those respondents who voted for Paul in the Republican primary, only 38 percent voted for John McCain in November.**

**UCLA political scientist Sylvia Friedel found that the abortion issue could explain some variations in libertarian voting.**

Moderately pro-life libertarians, for instance, shifted from a 40.7-point Republican margin to a 31.4-point margin. But the margin among moderately pro-choice libertarians dropped by 33 points, and strongly pro-choice libertarians shifted from a 29.8 point Republican margin to a 22.1-point Democratic margin. Those shifts were compounded by the larger numbers of libertarians in the pro-choice camp as time went by.

### **What Do Libertarians Call Themselves?**

The word “libertarian” remains unfamiliar to many people who hold “fiscally conservative, socially liberal” views. For many Americans, the word libertarian has negative connotations, perhaps conjuring up images of gun-toting, pot-smoking, “atomistic” individualists. Or, as columnist Charles Krauthammer put it, “a race of rugged individualists each living in a mountaintop cabin with a barbed wire fence and a ‘No Trespassing’ sign outside.”<sup>42</sup> In 2007 a Washington Post poll asked, “In politics, do you consider yourself libertarian, or not?”<sup>43</sup> While 18 percent said “yes,” which was in line with other data sources, only one-third of these libertarians identified themselves as “socially liberal” and “fiscally conservative.” Oddly, these “libertarians” were as willing to call themselves fiscal liberals as fiscal conservatives, perhaps resulting from confusion with the term “civil libertarian.” So, what do libertarians call themselves?

- **“Conservative”**—According to ANES data, if libertarians are offered the traditional liberal-conservative choice, 40 percent call themselves “conservative.” Of course, this description conflates conservatives and libertarians, making it hard for pollsters and pundits to recognize the difference. For instance, in a recent *Washington Post* column, Bill Kristol cited an increase in the number of conservatives in a Gallup poll as a reason for optimism; many of these “conservatives” are surely libertarians.<sup>44</sup>
- **“Moderate”**—While some think of lib-

ertarians as extreme, according to ANES data, 42 percent of libertarians call themselves “moderate” or “slightly conservative.” This is not an unreasonable description. After all, libertarianism centers on individual rights, private property, and personal responsibility—institutions that were central to the American Founding. Further, today’s libertarians sense that they are not as far left as liberals on economic issues, nor as far right as conservatives on social issues.

- **“Libertarian”**—According to the CAP data, when offered the choice of the word “libertarian” alongside conservative and moderate, 6 percent of respondents will call themselves libertarian. This is consistent with 2008 Rasmussen data that found 4 percent of respondents self-identify as libertarians.<sup>45</sup> This group likely includes many libertarian intellectuals who are more recognizable in Washington political circles as bloggers, economists, and scholars at think tanks, as well as people who read libertarian magazines, visit libertarian websites, or support Ron Paul or Libertarian Party candidates. Interestingly, younger libertarians are more than twice as likely to self-identify as “libertarian.” According to the CAP data, when offered the option, 13 percent of young people call themselves libertarian—about the same percentage as call themselves conservative.
- **“Independent”**—According to ANES data, 46 percent of libertarians called themselves “independent” on a party-affiliation question in 2004, and 28 percent chose the “independent” label in 2008. According to CAP data, younger libertarians are twice as likely to call themselves independent.
- **“Fiscally conservative, socially liberal”**—According to the Zogby poll in 2006, 59 percent of Americans say this describes their views. And 44 percent agree that “fiscally conservative and socially liberal, also known as libertarian” applies to them.

## Conclusion

The energy in American politics in 2008 was on the left—among people who wanted the Bush administration out. That generated a record turnout in the presidential election, and a comfortable win for Barack Obama. In 2009 the energy has been on the anti-government side, as more and more voters react negatively to government takeovers of health care, energy, automobile companies, and the financial sector.

Some libertarians, especially young libertarians, were part of that cultural enthusiasm for Obama.<sup>46</sup> More libertarians are joining and leading the free-market opposition to Obama's actual policies. And libertarians are leading indicators of the centrists and independents who swing elections. This libertarian segment is becoming better recognized. Public affairs consultant Frank B. Atkinson, writing in the *Washington Post* last September, noted that the Virginia election would depend on "the all-important independent voters—the disproportionately moderate, young, prosperous, suburban and libertarian-leaning people who typically decide Virginia contests."<sup>47</sup> It looks like he knew what he was talking about. Television ads, at least those in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., were dominated by two libertarian themes: Democratic nominee Creigh Deeds told voters over and over again that his Republican opponent, Bob McDonnell, was a reactionary social conservative. McDonnell countered with endless plays of Deeds's stumbling admission that he would raise taxes. Judging by the results, it looks like voters worried more about taxes and the overreach of the Obama administration than about McDonnell's downplayed ambition to roll back social change.

In fact, while libertarians typically bemoan what they see as America's "road to serfdom," our political system has already responded in significant ways to libertarian attitudes on both personal and economic freedom. Brink Lindsey described a "libertarian consensus that mixes the social freedom of the left with

the economic freedom of the right" in his book *The Age of Abundance*.<sup>48</sup> Matt Welch and Nick Gillespie said that right now is a "libertarian moment."<sup>49</sup> And most recently Jacob Weisberg predicted the imminent end to various kinds of prohibition in these United States:

Within 10 years, it seems a reasonable guess that Americans will travel freely to Cuba, that all states will recognize gay unions, and that few will retain criminal penalties for marijuana use by individuals. Whether or not Democrats retain control of Congress, whether or not Obama is re-elected, and whether they happen sooner or later than expected, these reforms are inevitable—not because politics has changed but because society has. . . . Republicans face a risk in resisting these new realities. Freedom is part of their brand; if the GOP remains the party of prohibition, it will increasingly alienate libertarian-leaningers and the young. But the party as presently constituted has very little capacity to accept social change.<sup>50</sup>

If the libertarian vote is indeed a leading indicator of swings among centrist, independent-minded voters, then President Obama and the Democrats will lose elections they would otherwise win in the 2010 midterm election. In 2008 libertarians voted heavily for McCain, despite their reservations about his policies and Republicans in general. It seems that libertarians took the prospect of big-government Democrats leading the country through a financial crisis as a more serious threat than Republicans.

This has two important implications for strategists in both parties. First, in our 2006 paper, we speculated that one of the reasons pundits, pollsters, and strategists neglect libertarians is that they are less likely to be organized. We wrote, "Social conservatives have evangelical churches, the Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family. . . . Liberals have unions. . . . Libertarians have think tanks."<sup>51</sup>

**The word "libertarian" remains unfamiliar to many people who hold "fiscally conservative, socially liberal" views.**

**If the libertarian vote is indeed a leading indicator of swings among centrist, independent-minded voters, then President Obama and the Democrats will lose elections they would otherwise win in the 2010 midterm election.**

In the past three years, however, libertarians have become a more visible, organized force in politics, particularly as campaigns move online. Ron Paul's campaign demonstrated that libertarians can be organized and raise large sums of money through the Internet. Tea Party protests demonstrated that libertarian-inspired anger can boil over to spontaneous, nationwide rallies. On September 12, 2009, more than 100,000 people marched on Washington to protest federal spending and the growth of government, carrying nerdy, libertarian-inspired signs such as "What Would Mises Do?" and "I Am John Galt."<sup>52</sup>

Libertarians are emerging as a force within American politics. The *New York Times* reported recently that former House Majority Leader Dick Armey's audiences in North Carolina "were people who tend to distrust the hand of government and suspect that big initiatives from Washington will take something away from them, whether they have a little or a lot. Their way of thinking—libertarian, anti-Washington, old-fashioned get-out-of-my-way-and-I'll-make-it-on-my-own American self-sufficiency—is as old as the republic."<sup>53</sup>

This has already had an impact on policymakers' decisions. For instance, in an interview about the health care debate, Senator Olympia Snowe, who holds a swing vote on the issue, told the *Washington Post* that her "libertarian streak" might impel her to oppose an insurance mandate.

The second implication for strategists is that libertarians have yet to find a comfortable home among political parties, particularly younger libertarians. Given the anti-competitive restrictions on third parties imposed by campaign finance and ballot access laws, the two-party system is likely to survive for the foreseeable future. However, if Republicans embrace the libertarian roots of the party, they stand to gain favor among these independent-minded voters. And if Democrats move toward drug policy reform, marriage equality, withdrawal from Iraq, and fiscal responsibility, they also stand to gain. As long as neither major party is committed to liberty and limited government, libertari-

ans will likely continue to be only weakly affiliated with either party.

Regardless, as more and more pundits talk about libertarians, poll on libertarians, and try to understand what's going on with the libertarians, the demographic will only gain in recognition and importance. This is good news for the cause of liberty.

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19. 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 greater than a 95 percent confidence level (t-stat = 3.0136).

20. Note: ANES asked the question a slightly dif-

ferent way, so that votes for third-party or independent candidates were not recorded in 2006. Libertarian voters seem to vote for alternative candidates at a higher rate than other voters.

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