



‘\$100 Million Question’ for Romney: Will he do what it takes to win over Libertarians in 2012?

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For Mitt Romney to have a better chance of surpassing the still small lead President Barack Obama holds in general election polling, he'll likely need the support of the growing block of libertarian and libertarian-leaning voters.

But the question remains whether Romney can or will present the arguments necessary to appeal to undecided libertarians and supporters of former Republican candidate Ron Paul, and Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson; the former two-term Republican Governor of New Mexico who left the GOP presidential primary to run as a Libertarian last December.

“It’s the 100 million dollar question” Matt Welch, editor-in-chief of the influential libertarian magazine Reason, told TheBlaze by phone last week when asked how libertarians and Ron Paul supporters will take to Romney and the GOP going into elections this November. “If you ask small ‘I’ and big ‘L’ libertarians I think you’ll get different answers.”

Welch notes that it is hard to pinpoint the direction of the American libertarian vote in 2012 because there are several different factions based on ideological leanings and demographics among those who identify as libertarian or have libertarian-leanings. Welch speculated that “among those who supported Ron Paul, I don’t think you’ll get a majority to vote for Mitt Romney.”

“A lot will sit on their hands, some will vote for Mitt Romney, some will vote for Gary Johnson.”

Libertarians and libertarian-leaning voters have usually coalesced behind Republicans in recent presidential elections, supporting the GOP candidate over the Democratic candidate by over 20 points in five of the last six presidential elections. In 2008, libertarians were largely unresponsive to Obama despite having mixed feelings towards the GOP. Studies by the Cato Institute found

that 71 percent of libertarian-leaning Americans voted for John McCain compared with 27 percent for Obama.

Those who identify with libertarian ideas represent a sizable part of the voter base in America. In a 2006 Zogby International poll, 59 percent of respondents said “yes” to whether they would describe themselves as “fiscally conservative and socially liberal.” The poll was commissioned by David Boaz and David Kirby of the Cato Institute – a think tank dedicated to advancing principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace — who have conducted several studies together on the libertarian-leaning voter beginning with a 2006 paper where they determined through admittedly strict calculations that 13 to 15 percent of the electorate could be defined as libertarian. In a 2010 paper, Boaz and Kirby noted that Gallup polling on the issue consistently finds about 20 percent of respondents to be libertarian.

So how can Romney win over supporters of Ron Paul’s presidential campaign and other libertarian-leaning voters in 2012?

During an interview at TheBlaze’s New York City newsroom last week, Rep. Paul’s son — Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul — said Romney will need to be more aggressive about fighting for a balanced budget and limited government to win over his father’s supporters and more constitutional conservatives.

“You have to really truly believe in balancing the budget,” Rand Paul said in an interview with TheBlaze senior contributor Mallory Factor. “That means cutting government spending. Slowing down just the rate of growth of government spending probably isn’t going to be enough for a lot of Ron Paul people.”

Matt Kibbe, President and CEO of FreedomWorks; an organization that works to recruit, train and mobilize activists to fight for less government and lower taxes, also told TheBlaze that Romney has the ability to win over voters “at the margin” by showing a commitment to basic principles; like the government should not spend money it doesn’t have, or get involved in all parts of our life. FreedomWorks has played a key role in the growth of the Tea Party movement, and were early supporters of the successful 2010 senatorial campaigns of Rand Paul and Mike Lee, and now GOP nominee for U.S. Senator from Texas Ted Cruz and GOP nominee for U.S. Senator from Indiana Richard Mourdock, all candidates that have at times been described to hail from the more libertarian-wing of the GOP.

Kibbe tells TheBlaze that he has met and worked with thousands of Americans who believe strongly in freedom and the power of the individual, which he would describe as “functional libertarianism,” who will be active in elections this year.

Nick Gillespie, editor-in-chief of Reason.com and Reason TV, published a post a few hours before Romney’s speech to the Republican National Convention last month bluntly laying out three ways Romney, Ryan and Republicans can woo over libertarians: “get serious about

cutting spending,” “get serious about bringing home the troops,” and “get serious about staying out of personal lives.”

“If Romney wants to carry libertarians, he needs to start talking about cutting the actual year-over-year totals that taxpayers shell out for big-ticket items such as Social Security, Medicare, and defense,” writes Gillespie, before going on to encourage the GOP to refrain from the foreign policy need to be “the world’s policemen.” Gillespie also wrote that “Romney needs to make clear that his limited government philosophy means the feds shouldn’t be intervening in the private lives of individuals unless it’s absolutely central to the survival of the nation.”

The RNC ended up being a series of ups and downs for GOP with libertarian and libertarian-leaning voters.

While the convention featured a video commemorating Ron Paul’s career, a well-received speech from Rand Paul (who had announced his support for Mitt Romney in June after his father acknowledged his delegate total was not enough to win the nomination), and libertarian-leaning Republicans being able to make some strides in shaping the 2012 GOP platform regarding foreign policy and monetary policy, there were some other problems. Many libertarians left the convention with a bad taste in their mouths after rules changes that some Ron Paul supporters protested from the convention floor as being aimed at curbing grassroots influence in the presidential nominating process. Also, little progress was made with the platform in regards to civil liberties and social issues of high-importance to younger libertarians less attracted to the GOP as it is.

David Boaz has his doubts about Ron Paul supporters voting for Romney in November, telling TheBlaze that it’s likely you’ll see the same pattern from Ron Paul people this year as you did in 2008; when only 38 percent of those who voted for Ron Paul in the Republican Primary voted for John McCain in general.

“The more a voter liked Ron Paul, the less likely he’ll be to vote for Romney,” the Cato Institute scholar commented to TheBlaze this week. “Those who loved Ron Paul, voted for him, and following the way he was treated at the Republican convention will be a tough sell for Romney. Those who liked Paul’s argument for much less government are likely to see Obama as the bigger threat, and that will be a larger number. Those who are more staunchly libertarian or who regard social issues and foreign policy as important are likely to strongly consider voting Libertarian.”

Boaz tells TheBlaze that libertarians would like to see a real economic plan from Romney, or some distance between him and the religious right.

“But he seems pretty determined not to give them either of those. His foray into China-bashing isn’t likely to help him with relatively educated, affluent, and economic-minded voters.”

Former spokesman for the Democratic National Committee from 1983 to 1987, Terry Michael has written commentary extensively for publications like Reason, TheStreet, and The Washington Times from the viewpoint of a self-described “libertarian Democrat,” and tells TheBlaze that Romney and the GOP have not presented an argument respecting both fiscal

responsibility and civil liberties to convince him that they will win the libertarian-leaning vote 2012.

“People want more economic choice along with social choice,” Michael tells TheBlaze while discussing the 2012 presidential race and libertarian vote. “That’s where the center of the electorate is going, whoever seizes that will win.”

In 2008, Michael argued “The Libertarian Case for Obama,” and endorsed the Illinois Democratic Senator. Michael has since abandoned Obama for his continued support of the War in Afghanistan and War on Drugs, in addition to having “rammed through a taxpayer and deficit-funded corporate welfare program for drug and insurance companies, in the guise of health care reform.” Michael is supporting Gary Johnson in 2012, but tells TheBlaze he still believes that many in the Democratic base have views likely closer to libertarianism than those of elected Democrats in Washington and their support of the AFL-CIO and “military-industrial-congressional-media complex.”

Additionally challenging for Republicans trying to retain the support of libertarian-leaning voters in the 2012 presidential election is the growing demographic of younger libertarians, alienated by much of the GOP policy over the last twelve years.

Reason’s Matt Welch commented to TheBlaze that he has observed an incredible growth and influence of libertarianism coming from college campuses in recent years, and sees it unlikely that young libertarians that are especially passionate about ending the drug war and supporting gay rights, would support Mitt Romney or the GOP.

“They’ve never been alive at a time when the GOP was serious about lowering the size of government,” Welch said on the lack of appeal Republicans have offered the growing number of young people in the libertarian movement. He notes that Barack Obama, who won over many young libertarians in 2008 with hopes of a less interventionist foreign policy and distance from the Bush administration and Washington Republicans like Sen. John McCain, has equally disappointed this demographic. Welch says Romney may have a chance to win some older libertarians that supported McCain in 2008, or those in the movement possibly swayed by the Paul Ryan selection.

“Mitt Romney hasn’t done anything as a candidate to woo over limited government supporters,” says Welch. “The biggest thing he’s done is appointed Paul Ryan—who is not without chinks in his armor though. Signing up on defense spending, TARP, the auto bailout....”

Since the early 1990s, CNN/ORC polls have periodically asked two questions aimed at gauging the adult electorate’s views on libertarian positions on economic and social issues:

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?

The June 2011 CNN/ORC poll found that the libertarian viewpoint answer to each of these questions had spiked to record highs. Sixty-three percent of respondents said that the government is “doing too much” when it comes to things that should be left to individuals and business, and 50 percent said the government should not favor any particular set of values in our society. An 11 and 9-point spike respectively following polling in December 2008 shortly after Barack Obama was elected president.

While these upward trends for a demographic that has more often than not strongly supported the GOP nominee for president, should be a good sign for Mitt Romney as he challenges a Democratic president that has struggled to stay above a fifty percent approval rate; widespread libertarian support has remained elusive for Romney.

A CNN/ORC poll released last week found that three percent of likely voters say they would likely vote for Libertarian Party Candidate for President Gary Johnson, 43 percent Romney, 51 percent Obama, 1 percent Green Party candidate Jill Stein, 1 percent none and another 1 percent no opinion. When asking registered voters who they would likely support, the gap between Obama and Romney grows to a 9-point margin, with Obama at 50 percent, Romney at 41 percent, and Johnson growing to 4 percent. While that figure for Johnson may seem insignificant, it would be ten times the percent of the popular vote won by the Libertarian Party in 2008. Polling showing support for the Libertarian Party candidate is also likely unable to identify the strong libertarian influence growing amidst the GOP, not guaranteed to vote Republican. As mentioned earlier, Boaz and Kirby wrote in 2010 that according to 2008-2009 American National Election Studies (ANES) data, only 38 percent of respondents who voted for libertarian-leaning candidate Rep. Ron Paul in the 2008 Republican primary voted for John McCain that following November. Twenty-four percent supported Obama, 33 percent responded “other.”

Following Ron Paul’s retirement announcement earlier this year, Matt Welch said he believes Paul “has been the biggest gateway drug for a lot of people into libertarianism over the last five years,” noting his popularity at college campuses.

“Younger libertarian voters are more likely to sit on their hands or vote Gary Johnson,” Welch told TheBlaze last week. “Older voters for Gary Johnson or the guy who will fire Obama (Romney).”

Many Romney surrogates and worried Republicans may see some tragic truth in Welch’s frank description of the options for older libertarians; a vote for Johnson, another third party candidate, or no vote at all is another vote not cast for “the guy who will fire Obama.”