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A shift toward libertarianism

Tue, 06/21/2011 - 11:27am | posted by Jason Pye

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Over at [FiveThirtyEight](#), Nate Silver points to a [recent CNN poll](#) showing that the public shifting more towards libertarian ideas (emphasis mine):

Since 1993, CNN has regularly asked a pair of questions that touch on libertarian views of the economy and society:

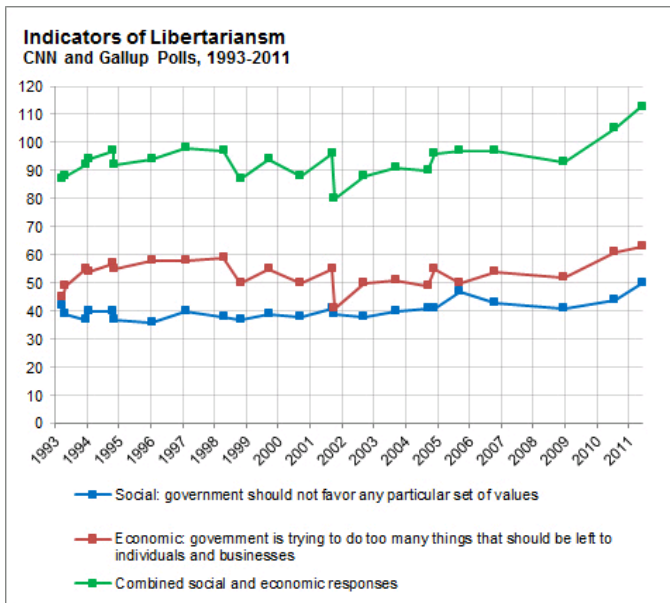
Some people think the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses. Others think that government should do more to solve our country's problems. Which comes closer to your own view?

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?

A libertarian, someone who believes that the government is best when it governs least, would typically choose the first view in the first question and the second view in the second.

[...]

[I]n CNN's latest version of the poll, conducted earlier this month, the libertarian response to both questions reached all-time highs. Some 63 percent of respondents said government was doing too much — up from 61 percent in 2010 and 52 percent in 2008 — while 50 percent said government should not favor any particular set of values, up from 44 percent in 2010 and 41 percent in 2008. (It was the first time that answer won a plurality in CNN's poll.)



Whether people are as libertarian-minded in practice as they might believe themselves to be when they answer survey questions is another matter. Still, there have been visible shifts in public opinion on a number of issues, ranging from increasing tolerance for same-sex marriage and marijuana legalization on the one hand, to the skepticism over stimulus packages and the health-care overhaul on the other hand, that can be interpreted as a move toward more libertarian views.

David Boaz and David Kirby have noted the impact of the libertarian vote at the Cato

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Jason Pye, Editor-In-Chief
jason [at] unitedliberty [dot] org

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brett [at] unitedliberty [dot] org

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Institute in two separate studies; [The Libertarian Vote](#) in 2006 and [The Libertarian Vote in the Age of Obama](#) in 2010. They've found that libertarians represent 14% of voters.

Given the economic intervention pushed through by a Democratic Congress in the first two years of President Barack Obama's administration, it's not hard to understand why the public would view government skeptically; after a sluggish economy and high unemployment tend to have that affect. On social issues, I've been saying for years that this next generation - even conservatives - are becoming increasingly libertarian; perhaps not on all issues, but marijuana legalization and gay marriage (or getting the state out of marriage all together) are commonly held views today.

No doubt, this sounds good for the liberty movement, but the real test is putting these views to work through reducing the size of government by repealing ObamaCare and finally dealing with the traditional third rail of American politics; entitlements. We'll see how the public deals with these issues as Democrats continue demagogue them during the rest of this year and into campaigns in 2012.

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