

National Journal

What Exactly Is a 'Conservatarian'?

No one seems to know what the new buzzword means.

By Emma Roller
July 16, 2014

This weekend, Sen. Rand Paul will headline a "conservatarian" conference in San Francisco. So, just what is a conservatarian? Hard to say.

The conference, called Reboot, is sponsored by a group founded by three young Republican operatives-turned-tech entrepreneurs. The event, organized by a group called LincolnLabs, is sponsored by Generation Opportunity, a branch of the Koch brothers' political network that targets young voters. (They're the group behind those Creepy Uncle Sam ads.)

LincolnLabs was started in 2013 by three Republican operatives, who left the Beltway for Silicon Valley as a way to recruit tech talent to the right side of the ideological spectrum. Garrett Johnson, one of LincolnLabs' founders, formerly worked for Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana. And despite being one of the first people to use the term, let alone organize a conference around it, Johnson is cagey about what exactly makes a conservatarian.

"My full-time focus is not figuring out the ideological tenets of conservatarianism," Johnson told *National Journal*. "We are not focused on talk and theory. We're focused on action and results, and that's something that really separates Washington, D.C., from Silicon Valley."

LincolnLabs is trying to tap into the network of more libertarian-minded tech entrepreneurs who populate Silicon Valley and the Bay Area. And it's working—they've attracted support from Alexis Ohanian, a Reddit cofounder and a partner at the venture-capital firm Y Combinator. In 2012, *Forbes* declared Ohanian—a vocal opponent of online regulations—"mayor of the Internet."

The Reboot conference this weekend will feature speeches from Paul and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, along with recorded missives from Bush and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. Coincidentally, Netroots Nation—a conference for liberal bloggers and activists

that grew out of the website *Daily Kos*—is also happening this weekend. But Johnson is quick to stress that unlike Netroots, Reboot is a tech conference, not a political one.

"In politics, arguments win the day," Johnson said. "In Silicon Valley, to the greatest extent possible, data and metrics settles the argument. We're focused on being results-driven. We're focused on action that's measurable rather than just rhetoric."

Over the past year, LincolnLabs has hosted "hackathons" in cities like Miami and Chicago, gathering tech-minded attendees to workshop data-driven solutions to issues like online voting, language learning in schools, city planning, and government transparency.

LincolnLabs isn't the only conservative group trying to make headway in Silicon Valley. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce—the largest pro-business lobby in the country—just opened its first major office outside of Washington in San Jose. Its task: to convince Silicon Valley entrepreneurs that their ideology aligns with the chamber's agenda, and to lobby on their behalf. "The U.S. Chamber's agenda IS the technology agenda," a promotional brochure insists.

"Our job is to tell the story that business is the answer, not the problem," David Chavern, the chamber's executive vice president, told *National Journal*. "And this ecosystem out here in the Bay Area is the perfect evocation of that."

But that could be a tall order for the conservative Chamber of Commerce. On one hand, despite being one of the fastest-growing entrepreneurial hubs in the U.S., Silicon Valley remains politically liberal. And culturally, Silicon Valley may be squeamish about the type of institutional power the chamber represents. The chamber advertised its new headquarters with an illustration of President Taft—who inspired the chamber's creation in 1911—wearing Google Glass.

"I do have some brand issues to get over," Chavern said. "The chamber is viewed as part of the establishment, and if you're in the tech sector you're used to thinking about disrupting the establishment."

David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, agreed that the fiscal conservatism offered by the chamber will be a harder sell in Silicon Valley compared with other business hubs.

"There are a lot of business people in Silicon Valley who aren't interested in playing the Washington game, and they see the Chamber of Commerce as the stuffy part of the Republican Party and the cronyist part of business," Boaz told *National Journal*. "I don't know whether the chamber lobbyists in California will go around in shorts and T-shirts, but they may very well relax their dress code from what I'm guessing it is on H Street."

But even Boaz—the leader of the premiere libertarian think tank in the country—had never heard of the term "conservatarian," and threw some cold water on the idea that this type of libertarianism is a novel idea for Californians.

Which brings us back to the original question—is "conservatarianism" a new, tech-minded branch of libertarianism, or is it the same old philosophy with a shiny new buzzword? The term seems to be just another addition to the lexicon of political flavors—are you a techno-utopian, a Randian idealist, or a run-of-the-mill nihilist?

"Libertarians have been on the cutting edge of technology for 30, 40 years," Boaz said. "Libertarianism was strongest in California back in the late '70s when technology was getting underway there. At this point I think we're past the early adopter stage of libertarianism. You can no longer be really cutting-edge by being a libertarian."

Boaz pointed out that in 1978, Ed Clark—a libertarian candidate for governor of California—won an impressive 5 percent of the vote. Despite losing, Clark went on to run for president two years later. His running mate? David Koch.