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The logical rise of the libertarian

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AT A time when Americans are increasingly fed up with politics as usual, does libertarianism — which champions freedom from government control in both economic and social spheres — present an appealing alternative to conservatism and liberalism?

Conservatives generally believe that the state should not decide whether you should have health insurance, drive an environmentally sound car, or give your employees parental leave. Liberals generally believe that the state should not decide whether you can watch dirty pictures, use marijuana for medical treatment or even recreation, or marry a same-sex partner. Conservatives want to limit the power of government in education; liberals, in policing.

Libertarians agree with all of the above.

Some say “the libertarian moment” is upon us — as Nick Gillespie and Matt Welch of Reason magazine argue in their recent book “The Declaration of Independents.” (I am a contributing editor at Reason.) In a CNN poll in June, record numbers of Americans agreed that “the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses” (63 percent, up from 52 percent in 2008) and that “the government should not favor any particular set of values” including traditional morals (50 percent, up from 41 percent in 2008). Support for libertarian causes such as marijuana legalization is at an all-time high.

On the political scene, Republican Representative Ron Paul of Texas, who ran for president on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1988, has been a strong presence in the Republican presidential race, bringing a radical pro-liberty voice to the debate. The Tea Party movement, a powerful grassroots force in today’s GOP, coalesced around hostility to big government.

Does all this add up to a coming libertarian triumph? Maybe not quite. Gillespie and Welch mention a Cato Institute study in which about 14 percent of American voters were classified as libertarians. A recent poll commissioned by Reason found that people with fiscally conservative and socially liberal - i.e., broadly libertarian - views made up about a quarter of the general population. Yet it is far from clear how far their fiscal conservatism and social liberalism would extend.

The Tea Party, for all its libertarian rhetoric, is driven more by populist anger at cultural elites than by the quest for individual freedom. In polls, Tea Party supporters tend to be strongly conservative on such issues as abortion and same-sex marriage, and to support security measures that expand government powers of spying on terror suspects. The truth is, many Americans' views on freedom and government are complex and sometimes confused. In the Reason poll, 54 percent felt that "regulation of businesses does more harm than good" while only 38 percent supported more government regulation; yet 48 percent favored a strong government capable of handling complex economic problems while 46 percent preferred a free market with less government involvement.

Libertarianism articulates important truths. Power corrupts. Government bureaucracies have a tendency to become self-serving and self-perpetuating, and to stifle productivity and creativity. State efforts to promote "values" have a tendency to infantilize adults and impose one group's beliefs on others.

And yet reality is never so simple. Overreach notwithstanding, government has made indispensable contributions to American life, from building the infrastructure to reducing racial discrimination to promoting scientific research with no short-term payoff. Such challenges as protecting the environment or ensuring health care for everyone may not have a free-market solution. Likewise, social tolerance is not always the answer to pressing questions.

Pure libertarianism has a whiff of utopia, like all ideologies that disregard the messy paradoxes of life. But libertarian ideas are an essential corrective to the authoritarian tendencies of both right and left. Libertarianism starts with the presumption that freedom of choice is a vitally important good. There may be sound reasons to abridge that freedom more often than most libertarians would allow; but the burden of proof should be on those who would abridge it. Without the libertarian voice, no exchange of ideas in American politics is complete.