



# The tide is rising for America's libertarians

By Edward Luce

The new spirit in a rising climate of anti-politics has become an attitude, rather than a movement  
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Robert Nozick, the late US libertarian, smoked pot while he was writing *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. He would applaud the [growth of libertarianism](#) among today's young Americans. Whether it is their enthusiasm for [legalised marijuana](#) and gay marriage – both spreading across the US at remarkable speed – or their scepticism of government, US millennials no longer follow President Barack Obama's cue. Most of America's youth revile the Tea Party, particularly its south-dominated nativist core. But they are not big-government activists either. If there is a new spirit in America's rising climate of anti-politics, it is libertarian.

On the face of it this ought to pose a bigger challenge to the [Republican party](#) – at least for its social conservative wing. Mr Obama may have disappointed America's young, particularly the millions of graduates who have failed to find good jobs during his presidency. But he is no dinosaur. In contrast, Republicans such as Rick Santorum, the former presidential hopeful, who once likened gay sex to “man on dog”, elicit pure derision. Even moderate Republicans, such as [Chris Christie](#), who until last week was the early frontrunner for the party's 2016 nomination, are considered irrelevant. Whether Mr Christie was telling the truth last week, when he denied knowledge of his staff's role in orchestrating a punitive local traffic jam, is beside the point. Mr Christie's *Sopranos* brand of New Jersey politics is not tailored to the Apple generation.

The opposite is true of [Rand Paul](#), the Kentucky senator, whose chances of taking the 2016 prize rose with Mr Christie's dented fortunes last week. Unlike Ron Paul, the senator's father, who still managed to garner a large slice of the youth vote in 2008, Rand Paul eschews the more outlandish fringes of libertarian thought. Rather than promising an isolationist US withdrawal from the world, he touts a more moderate “non-interventionism”. Instead of pledging to end fiat money, he promises to audit the US Federal Reserve – “mend the Fed”, rather than “end the Fed”. Both find echo among the Y generation. So too does his alarmism about the [US national debt](#). Far from being big spenders, millennials are more concerned about US debt than other generations, according to polls. They are also strongly in favour of free trade. More than a third of the Republican party now identifies as libertarian, according to the Cato Institute. Just under a quarter of Americans do so too, says Gallup.

All of which looks ominous for [Ted Cruz](#), the Texan Republican whose lengthy filibuster against Obamacare last year lit the fuse for the US government shutdown. Mr Cruz, also a 2016 aspirant, leads the pugilistic wing of the Republican party that is prepared to burn the house down in order to save the ranch. Although also a Tea Partier, Mr Paul is cultivating a sunnier Reaganesque optimism that draws on the deep roots of US libertarianism. His brand of politics also strikes a chord with those who fear the growth of the [US surveillance state](#) – the types who view Edward Snowden (another millennial) as a hero rather than a traitor. Last year the US House of Representatives came within 12 votes of passing a bill to defund the National Security Agency. Mr Paul led the bill in the Senate. Next time they could succeed.

November 2012: While Obama lost ground among white male voters, his 2012 victory was the product of perhaps the most diverse electoral coalition in American history. Voters talk about how they interpret the president's re-election

What does it mean for the [Democrats](#)? In terms of social values, libertarians are almost identical to liberals. Smoking pot and same-sex marriage both meet with big approval. The same is not necessarily true of guns. In spite of recent school massacres, 40 US states now have “concealed weapons” laws – many passed in the past 12 months. Again, millennials are surprisingly sceptical of gun control, say the polls. But it is on economic policy where they really part company with liberals. The Great Depression helped forge a generation of solid Democrats. The same does not appear to be true of the Great Recession. Franklin Roosevelt helped dig people out of misery in the 1930s by providing direct public employment. Mr Obama, on the other hand, has stuck largely to economic orthodoxy. He may have missed a golden opportunity to mould a generation of social democrats.

He has also inadvertently fuelled scepticism about the role of government. Mr Obama came to power in 2008 on a surge of voluntarism. He did so in part by appealing to youthful idealism about public service. That now feels like a long time ago. Distrust in public institutions has continued to rise during his presidency – most strongly among the youngest generation. The share of voters who identify as independents, rather than Democrats or Republicans, recently hit an all-time high of 42 per cent, according to Gallup. This is bad news for established figures in either party – and, indeed, in any walk of life. Hillary Clinton should beware. So should Jeb Bush.

On the minus side, libertarians have no real answer to many of America's biggest problems – not least the challenges posed to US middle-class incomes by globalisation and technology. Nor are they coherent as a force. Libertarianism is an attitude, rather than an organisation. It is also potentially fickle. Young Americans disdain foreign entanglements. That could change overnight with a big terrorist attack on the homeland. They feel let down by Democrats and hostile to mainstream Republicans. Yet they could flock to an exciting new figure in either party. There is a restless generation that disdains authority. Establishment figures should take note. Tomorrow belongs to them.

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