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American Way: between Democrats and Republicans, a libertarian "third force" is emerging

After a decade when America's political divide has never been so stark, a resurgence in libertarian demands for smaller government and greater personal freedom is reshaping America

By Peter Foster
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On the surface, American politics often seems so tribally divided between Democrat and Republican, Liberal and Conservative that there is little point in even bothering with the shades of grey in between.

But while it is true that third party candidates don't succeed in US general elections, the failures of first the Bush and now the Obama administrations have seen the emergence not of a third party in US politics but a libertarian 'third force' that could yet influence the outcome in 2016.

Listen carefully and libertarian ideas – with a small 'l' – can be heard shaping many of the big issues of the day, from marijuana legalisation, to penal reform; from digital privacy issues in the wake of the Edward Snowden revelations to whether or not to bomb Syria.

What fascinates is how the traditional American yearning for smaller government and greater personal freedom can resonate simultaneously with both liberals and conservatives at a time when those two forces have never appeared more implacably opposed.

The Snowden files outraged both liberals on the left and libertarians on the right; the push to legalise marijuana and end the drug war also finds supporters at both ends of the political horseshoe, as have campaigns to change attitudes to gay marriage.

The libertarian sentiment reflects the pitchfork politics that gave rise to the Tea Party on the right and the Occupy movements on the left that were both fuelled by public disillusion with the power of conventional politics to deliver anything other than the stagnant status quo.

Measuring the potential electoral impact of libertarianism is difficult precisely because it cuts across traditional party lines, which is both its protean strength and political weakness in an era of big money politics.

Put a capital 'L' on libertarianism and it largely evaporates – Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party candidate in 2012, won only 1 per cent of the popular vote (1.2m people), but research by the Cato Institute, the libertarian think-tank, points a much deeper pool of Americans with libertarian leanings.

When they asked voters if they considered themselves "fiscally conservative and socially liberal – also known as libertarian", some 44 per cent of Americans were happy to be placed in that category.

The politician most obviously trying to capitalise on the idea that Americans aren't quite so easily pigeonholed into red and blue boxes is Rand Paul, a Republican senator from Kentucky who the bookies rate as a leading contender for 2016.

As the son of veteran libertarian Ron Paul, his formula will be to bring libertarian ideas off the fringe – where his cranky dad always languished – and into the mainstream, tapping that well of disaffection that resonates across party lines.

The younger Paul has demonstrated a knack for cutting through when it comes to popular issues.

When riot police overstepped the mark in Ferguson, Missouri following the shooting of a black teenager this summer, it was Mr Paul who spoke out about the obscene militarisation of American police forces, hitting a sweet spot with both young liberals and conservative anti-big government types.

In the same vein and in a rare moment of bipartisanship, Mr Paul is working with a Democrat colleague to end the mandatory sentencing laws that are clogging up America's bloated and broken jail system with non-violent offenders, at vast cost and to little good effect.

It is a bold gambit that could resonate both with minorities – particularly African-Americans who are disproportionately sentenced – and the young drug decriminalisation lobby which has gathered strength since Colorado and Washington state legalised marijuana in 2012.

To make it off the fringes, of course, Mr Paul must win the Republican nomination, which means convincing his party's traditional conservative base to broaden its horizons. "We need to look more like the rest of America," he told a rally in North Carolina this week.

It was a message that was greeted, perhaps tellingly, by near silence. He will also have to show that his isolationist instincts – still popular in a war-weary America, but tested by recent events

in Iraq and Syria – can sustain a foreign policy that is fit for purpose in the age of the Islamic State.

But were it to happen, a match up against Hillary Clinton throws up the intriguing prospect that on some issues – drugs, prisons and foreign policy – a Rand Paul Republican candidacy would be more liberal than that of an establishment Democrat then approaching her seventieth year.

If his candidacy catches fire, it will be because Mr Paul awakens America's disaffected centre to the idea that between the battle lines of American politics, beyond the party banners and flags, there is more common ground than is popularly understood.