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Half of Tea Partiers Are Libertarians. The Fun Half.

Katherine Mangu-Ward | October 28, 2010

David Kirby—of Holy Moley, There Are Libertarians Everywhere! fame—is at it again, separating the wheat from the chaff at a recent Tea Party rally and finding that about half of the revelers are best described as libertarians. Kirby, along with Cato colleague Emily Ekins, reports that 48 percent of participants at a Virginia rally "believe 'the less government the better' and don't see a role for government in promoting 'traditional values.'"

About 60 percent of these folks call themselves "independent" or "something else" when asked about their political affiliation, so they can be tough to sniff out. But for you skeptics out there:

Some might say that two Cato Institute analysts are likely to find libertarians everywhere. But our survey replicates a Politico/Targetpoint survey from a tea party rally in April, which also revealed an even split between libertarians and conservatives.

This is reflected as well in a new national survey from The Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard on the role of government. It found respondents who support or lean toward the tea party split on the social issues: 42 percent moderate-to-liberal, 57 percent conservative or very conservative.

If the Tea Party seems schizo—what with all of the "Get Government Out of My Medicare" business—that's because it's a house divided. Or at least a lean-to partitioned by a sheet strung on a clothesline. The traditional conservatism of half the crowd is easier for outsiders to grasp, and easier to capture in polls. But buried in the crowd are findings like this one, which reveal something else is going on in the ranks besides the same old conservative Republican ticked-offness:

When asked whether the Republican or Democratic Party has the best ideas to fix government, 80 percent of tea party libertarians said "neither can be trusted," compared to 64 percent of conservatives.



Elsewhere, Cato's David Boaz—the other half of the dynamic Holy Moley, There Are Libertarians Everywhere! duo—sees a wee libertarian boomlet in the interstices of polls on weed, gay marriage, and health care. And in the *Examiner* yesterday, John Vaught LaBeaume sees some folks anxious to hop onto the libertarian hayride, including Rep. Ron Paul's opponent.