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Message to Libertarians: Swing Left to Obama

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The pivoting has begun.

As the 2012 presidential race veers from the pyrotechnics of the primary season to the hand-to-hand combat of the general election campaign, strategists on both sides of the battlefield have turned their gaze from their respective base camps to the murkier no-man's land in the middle: the swing-voters. Always unpredictable, this year's swingers are comprised of a generous share of the nation's youth, as well as political centrists, NPR Republicans, soccer moms, NASCAR dads and a ragtag army of third-party faithful.

Lost in this mix -- but never forgotten -- are the increasingly popular Libertarians, who make up between 10 and 20 percent of the [voting public](#). That number skyrockets to more than 40% if you don't mention the L-word but, rather, simply ask voters if they are "fiscally conservative and socially liberal" -- a popular mantra of today's Libertarian-leaning [youth](#).

Yet while Libertarians claim to swing both ways, they have historically gone to bed with Republicans. No surprise there. Considering the average Libertarian's demographic (wealthy, educated and white), Republicans generally close the deal with such checkbook-driven come-ons as the promise to cut taxes, which weigh more heavily on the minds of the investor class than, say, abortion, an explosive issue but one that doesn't really affect their day-to-day lives.

Unsure if you're a Libertarian? Here are ten tell-tale signs:

- You are constantly defending your vote at cocktail parties by saying, "No I'm not a Republican, I'm just fiscally conservative and socially liberal."
- You and most of your friends work for -- or have been recently laid off by -- an investment bank or hedge fund.
- You can actually explain what a hedge fund is.
- You have quoted Ayn Rand on a date. Without embarrassment.
- You first heard of the *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu in business school, read some of it, and now list it on Facebook among your favorite books.
- You find your die-hard liberal parents irritatingly self-righteous, but you don't disagree with *everything* they say.

- The Republican base is like your booty-call: you mostly hate them but know you'll text them when you get desperate.
- If the Cato Institute loses its battle against the hostile-takeover attempts by the [Koch brothers](#), that would be like your backup person getting married to that girl you hated in junior high.
- You know who Gary Johnson is, and wish other people did too.
- The idea of Romney debating Obama, or the idea of Romney speaking in public -- or the idea of Romney speaking at all -- makes you want to move to Guam.

If you identified with any five of the above, you qualify as a Libertarian -- and guess what? President Obama continues to struggle with your vote. That's because he knows he's spent the last few years disappointing you -- with snail-like progress on the jobs front, stagnation on the warfront, hedging on civil liberties, and the kind of spending that doesn't exactly sit well with your fiscal conservatism.

To make matters worse, the Obama campaign's recent ads attacking Mitt Romney's robber-baron tactics with [Bain Capital](#) more than 20 years ago have alienated Libertarians of all stripes by regurgitating tired Democratic themes of corruption and economic inequity in the capital markets. Not the best idea to highlight Romney's unassailable record as a successful corporate suit, especially when that may be the only thing about him that young Libertarians respect.

Republicans rarely make this mistake with swing voters. Historically, they know well to leave their high-school sweetheart base behind during the general election (along with their primary-season pillow talk about the evils of birth control) and, instead, focus on the kinds of issues that seduce voters with bi-party tendencies. Relying on the country's short attention span, Romney did exactly that last month, kicking off his election campaign with fiery homilies about reforming the economy and the education system. Voters' ears immediately perked up -- as did Romney's [poll numbers](#).

So what can the President do to win back some of those younger voters who swooned over him in 2008, and now feel spurned and cheated on? For one thing, he can better expose his opponent's tendency to stray.

Take Romney's views on [foreign policy](#), which sound more like a kid trash-talking in a game of Risk than thoughtful geopolitical discourse. Both his support for our invasion of Iraq and his eagerness to hop on the "lets go get Iran" bandwagon (and maybe Syria?) fly in the face of traditional non-interventionist Libertarian philosophy. He also pays the obligatory Republican lip-service to having Israel's back at all costs, indicating how much he wants to go steady with Prime Minister Netanyahu. These pep-rally cheers not only show a dangerous tendency to be both overly confident and jarringly naïve, but are about as far from small government as you can get, and sure to keep deficits large.

Then there's individual rights, which in Romney speeches seem to be mere sacrificial lambs to theocratic policies based on religion and morality. He's against gay marriage (proposing a Constitutional amendment), abortion, birth control, Planned Parenthood and stem cell research (the latter in defense of those defenseless embryos). Add to those assaults his non-theological hostility to civil rights -- from mean-spirited immigration policies to advocating for further unilateral executive power to draconian drug policies that have proven to be failures -- and young Libertarians should think twice before wearing the letter sweater of the man from Utah.

Granted, Republicans will always have their trump card -- tax breaks -- but a few more bucks and the promise to roll back all those nettlesome business regulations won't make jobs magically appear, curb massive war spending, shrink the deficit or protect individual rights from further erosion. Plus, like most Republicans, Romney will probably ultimately bow to political realities and avoid messing with entitlements. Isn't that what always happens?

Hopefully come fall, swing-voters will not be lured by the Republicans' siren call for a return to phony Fifties-era prosperity, because that will only trip up the country as it begins to crawl out of one of the worst economic crises ever inherited from a Republican president. Instead, young voters should swallow hard and reconcile with their old flame Obama, because Romney's just like any other rebound relationship: full of sweet talk and empty promises that never really work out.

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