

Flap over Spying Shows Party Isn't Everything in U.S. Politics

By: Jared Metzker – July 26, 2013

Party allegiances apparently mean little in the U.S. when it comes to the debate over domestic government surveillance.

A study released this morning by the Pew Research Center, a major U.S. polling agency, revealed that 57 percent of Democrats approve of government spying, along with 44 percent of Republicans.

“There is a real division within each party on this issue,” Norman J. Ornstein, a renowned expert on U.S. politics, told IPS.

This was evident in the U.S. Congress on Wednesday, when a vote to curtail domestic spying by the National Security Agency (NSA) sundered the Democratic and Republican parties alike.

The vote was the first of its kind to take place since the revelations by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden which, when published by The Guardian newspaper, exposed a degree of domestic surveillance far greater in scale and scope than was previously understood by the public.

The 217-205 decision to reject an amendment blocking spending on NSA domestic spying was so close that one political commentator called it a “nail biter”. Of the 205 votes in favour, 111 were from Democrats and 94 from Republicans, and of the 217 votes opposed, 83 were from Democrats votes and 134 from Republicans.

“You’re not going to see many votes like this,” says Ornstein, who is a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a Washington-based neoconservative think tank.

William A. Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, another think tank here, agrees that the outcome was unusual.

“It did not conform to standard party lines but instead saw an unusual coalition of the libertarian right and the liberal left voting against the centres of both parties,” Galston told IPS.

Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute, a research organisation which advocates individual liberties and limited government, told IPS that there are historical reasons for civil liberties being a major issue for members of both parties.

“The libertarian strain is a natural dimension of Republican ideology which was diminished by the immediate reaction to [the attacks of Sep. 11, 2001], and now it is sort of naturally reasserting itself,” says Sanchez.

“[On the other hand,] progressive activists have frequently been the targets of abusive intelligence powers,” he added, citing historical examples of government crackdowns on unions, civil rights groups and other leftist organisations as lessons that help explain Democratic opposition to spying.

Rising Tide

Both Ornstein and Galston told IPS that the narrow decision in congress was reflective of public opinion.

“There is a rising tide of public concern about the balance that’s being struck between national security and civil liberties,” says Galston.

U.S. citizens, Ornstein told IPS, are “strongly divided as a whole”.

Indeed, the Pew poll indicates more U.S. citizens favour being surveilled by their own government, but only by a slim margin.

Of the 1480 adults surveyed, 50 percent overall said they approved of the domestic surveillance programme, while 44 percent actually said they disapproved.

In a separate question, 56 percent agreed that federal courts have failed to impose adequate limits on intelligence gathering.

Based on the Pew findings, age and gender seem to be factors in where citizens stand on the issue.

By a ratio of about two-to-one, 60 to 29 percent, young respondents said they were more concerned about the government doing too much to weaken civil liberties than they were about it doing too little to defend the nation from terror. In terms of gender, 51 percent of men agreed with this statement, as opposed to only 29 percent of women.

In the report, Pew concludes that the views of U.S. citizens on this issue are “complex”, a conclusion based in part on the relative lack of correlation with party leanings.

Spill Over

Ornstein believes that the cross-cutting divide splitting both major parties is “issue-specific” and unlikely to spill over into other major controversies, for example on social issues such as spending on health care.

To an extent, Galston agrees.

“The liberal left has strict views on economic questions that are poles apart from the views of the libertarians,” Galston says, “and it would be very hard for them to find common ground.”

Liberal Democrats, Galston explains, would have difficulty accepting the small-government solutions often championed by libertarian Republicans.

He notes, however, that more legislation on government spying will take place in the foreseeable future, and that the closeness of Wednesday’s vote was indicative of a strengthening bipartisan opposition to intrusive government tactics.

Cato’s Sanchez believes this like-mindedness could spill over into over issues, namely those related to civil liberties.

“There are civil libertarian wings of both parties, so I expect we could see cooperation on other things, such as free speech issues,” Sanchez says.

It is widely speculated that the de facto leader of the libertarian wing of the Republican Party, Senator Rand Paul, will make a run for the presidency in 2016. One early poll has placed him as the current top contender for the Republican nomination.

Galston told IPS that this issue has opened the way for “conversation” between Paul’s faction of the right and the liberal left.

“Now that they’ve discovered each other, there is likely to be more conversation across party lines,” says Galston. “This is probably a beginning rather than an end.”