

Nation has arrived at a new ‘libertarian moment,’ experts say

By: Dave Helling and Steve Kraske – August 5, 2013

For half a century, the micro-government movement known as libertarianism has lapped at the beach of American politics.

Sometimes, the tide rolls slowly; other times, it’s a bigger wave.

This summer, the surf is up.

From issues such as same-sex marriage and legal marijuana to restrictions on government spying and U.S. intervention in foreign affairs, the nation is engaged in a new “libertarian moment,” politicians and political scientists say.

“The libertarian mindset — just leave me alone, get government out of my way, government shouldn’t tell me what I can or cannot do — that is definitely a larger and more active group than I’ve ever seen before,” said Missouri Sen. Brad Lager, a Republican from Savannah.

Brink Lindsey, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, sees the same phenomenon.

“The libertarian impulse is especially prominent right now, and getting attention,” he said.

That impulse isn’t aimed at dramatically increasing support for the existing Libertarian political party. That’s been stuck in the low single digits for decades and is likely to stay there, observers said.

It’s also likely to have little impact in the Democratic Party, which shares libertarians’ enthusiasm for civil liberties, but little else.

Instead, “small-l” libertarians have turned their attention to the Republican Party, where a fierce battle for message control is underway.

Consider:

- Kentucky GOP Sen. Rand Paul, a leading libertarian voice, recently engaged in a nasty public battle with New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie over government surveillance policy. Paul wants more limits on secret surveillance; Christie, also a Republican, does not.
- Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, libertarian Republicans, threatened to shut down the federal government over funding for the Affordable Care Act.

- In July, Rep. Tim Huelskamp of Kansas voted against a new farm bill, earning applause from libertarian groups but frowns from the House GOP leadership.
- Huelskamp recently joined with Rep. Emanuel Cleaver and other liberal Democrats to support new libertarian restrictions on government eavesdropping.
- Libertarian Republicans in statehouses across the country this spring approved new expansions of gun rights, a popular libertarian goal.
- Lawmakers in Kansas and Missouri, worried about libertarian privacy concerns, considered bills this spring limiting drone aircraft.

In these cases and others, GOP libertarians fought mainstream, business- and compromise-oriented Republicans in an effort to promote their views.

“It’s animosity towards government,” said Jim Staab, a University of Central Missouri political science professor.

Libertarian movements aren’t new, of course. In the 1970s and again in the 1990s, many small-government conservatives drifted toward the libertarian approach whenever they believed GOP positions had drifted too far to the middle.

But the current libertarian moment may be getting a unique boost from younger politicians and voters. They’re blending socially tolerant views on same-sex marriage and drug use, experts said, with the anti-authoritarian ethos of the online generation to embrace a libertarian worldview.

“They came of age in a very different world than their parents,” said longtime GOP consultant Jeff Roe, who called libertarians a “significant” force in the Republican Party.

“Fifteen years ago, (we were) a bunch of middle-aged white guys debating philosophy,” said Al Terwelp, chair of the Kansas Libertarian Party. “That has significantly changed ... there are lots and lots of young people.”

Libertarians may soon face a similar choice between ideological purity and a message aimed at a broader audience, some said.

“In the past, there have been libertarians who have said ‘you can’t be a libertarian because you’re not libertarian enough,’” Terwelp said. “We have been working on that ... (But) we’re not changing our principles.”

Broadening libertarianism to include traditionally conservative views on social issues could draw more regular Republicans into the anti-government effort. At the same time, classic libertarians might be lost.

Vicki Sciolaro, chair of the Kansas GOP’s 3rd District, wants the party to unite around a single message instead of arguing over a libertarian vs. traditional approach.

“It’s a combination,” she said. “We need to focus on working from the grass roots up ... and let the people decide.”