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Most U.S. libertarians do not identify with Tea Party: survey

By Mary Wisniewski

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CHICAGO (Reuters) - Most American libertarians do not consider themselves part of the conservative Tea Party movement despite a public perception that the two political groups are linked, according to a national survey released on Tuesday.

Libertarians, who generally support maximizing individual rights and minimizing the role of government, differ sharply with the Tea Party and religious conservatives on issues such as abortion and decriminalization of marijuana, according to the survey by the non-partisan Public Religion Research Institute.

Sixty-one percent of libertarians do not identify themselves as part of the Tea Party, the survey showed. About 7 percent of the adult population is consistently libertarian and that includes 12 percent of those who describe themselves as Republicans.

"There's largely agreement on economic issues - the gap is in how libertarians approach social issues," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI, which conducts an annual "American Values Survey" on political and social issues.

While the survey showed that libertarians tend to favor Republicans, they are a swing group that can turn away from the party if it starts to favor too much government spending or interference with individual liberties, said Brink Lindsey of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington.

"Libertarians are not part of the Democratic Party's base, that's for sure, but they're not a reliable part of the Republican Party's vote," said Lindsey, who saw the survey. "Republicans can scare away libertarian voters."

He noted that the libertarian vote swung against Republicans in the 1992 presidential election, which included third party candidate Ross Perot, a businessman who favored a balanced budget and abortion rights. Both Perot and Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush lost to Democrat Bill Clinton.

In the current Virginia governor's race, Robert Sarvis, a libertarian who supports gun rights and same-sex unions, has the support of 11 percent of Republicans and 2 percent of Democrats, taking potential votes from front-running Democrat Terry McAuliffe and Republican state Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, according to a Quinnipiac University poll of likely voters released last week.

The PRRI survey identified libertarians through questions about their views on taxes and other policies, and by self-identification. A total of 13 percent of those surveyed called themselves libertarians - while 7 percent were inferred as consistent libertarians by how they answered certain questions. An additional 15 percent were seen as leaning libertarian.

Jones said it was crucial to understand libertarians since they will be an important part of conservative coalitions going forward. Most are under 50 and slightly more likely to vote in primaries than Republicans overall. More than two-thirds are men and nearly all are non-Hispanic whites.

Libertarians are more opposed to government involvement in economic policies than those affiliated with the Tea Party and Republicans overall, the survey found. For instance, 65 percent of libertarians were opposed to increasing the minimum wage, while 57 percent of Republicans overall supported it, the survey found.

Ninety-six percent of libertarians oppose President Barack Obama's landmark healthcare restructuring compared to 89 percent of Republicans.

But nearly 60 percent of libertarians oppose making it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion, while 58 percent of Republicans and those affiliated with the Tea Party favor such restrictions, according to the survey.

More than 70 percent of libertarians favored legalizing marijuana, while about 60 percent of Republicans and Tea Party members opposed such a move, the survey found.

Among libertarian voters who favor Republicans, U.S. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky was the favorite potential presidential candidate with 26 percent support, while 18 percent preferred Senator Ted Cruz of Texas. Among Tea Party voters, Cruz was the favored candidate at 22 percent, with Paul at 13 percent.

The survey interviewed 2,317 adults and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.