



## Libertarians prod Republicans and Democrats

Cathy Young November 4, 2013

Stories of government incompetence and overreach -- from the disastrous rollout of the federal health care exchange to ongoing revelations about National Security Agency surveillance -- have dominated the news.

It is telling that when the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, held a seminar in Manhattan last week, it recorded its highest attendance. (Disclosure: I am an unpaid research associate with Cato.)

So a new survey on libertarianism by the Public Religion Research Institute -- a nonpartisan group that studies religion, values, and public life -- couldn't come at a better time.

The survey pegged about 7 percent of Americans as fairly consistent libertarians prioritizing individual rights; another 15 percent are "libertarian leaners."

Libertarians are an eclectic lot, united by a belief in freedom in economic, social and political realms. They want government out of people's business, whether it's having an abortion, owning a gun, smoking marijuana or running a company -- or emailing your friends. Politically, about half are either independents or supporters of a party outside the two-party system; most of the rest are Republicans. While they have some overlap with the tea party movement, the latter is much more religious and socially conservative.

Libertarianism is often stereotyped as overwhelmingly white and male. The survey finds some truth to that -- but also more diversity than conventional wisdom holds. While 94 percent of libertarians are non-Hispanic whites, minorities make up about 20 percent of those leaning libertarian. And nearly a third of "true" libertarians and close to half of libertarian leaners are women.

Interestingly, libertarians are disproportionately young: One in four is under 30. This could make libertarianism the trend of the future, though some young people who prize autonomy above all may grow more community-minded and risk-averse as they age.

Americans' attitudes toward government are complex and often contradictory. Theoretically, the government is us -- of the people, for the people -- but it is also an institution that has legal power to coerce. In practice, we seem to want less government but more government services, less state power but more protection.

Even among self-identified libertarians, there is disagreement on the rightful scope of government. Although last week's event included a scathing speech by Cato vice president Gene Healy about National Security Agency spying, two Cato-affiliated scholars, Roger Pilon and Richard Epstein, have defended the surveillance as consistent with the state's proper role in national defense.

While virtually all libertarians oppose Obamacare, their reform ideas range from radical laissez-faire in the health care market (which they believe would lower prices) to a more flexible, privatized version of universal insurance.

There is little chance of a libertarian agenda prevailing in America. But as a challenge to orthodoxies of left and right, libertarianism is a force for good. It may not always have the answers, but it asks the right questions. We can debate how small government should be; but the inauspicious start of health care reform reminds us that when government grows too big, it is likely to bite off more than it can chew.

Both traditionalist conservatives and (especially) progressive liberals are inclined to scorn libertarians as selfish seekers of unrestrained pleasures and/or profits. But without the libertarian alternative, both traditionalism and progressivism are always at risk of slipping into soft tyranny.

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