



Cato study finds that the Tea Party's roots are fundamentally libertarian

Many on the left like to say that [the Tea Party movement is just the Christian right in disguise](#), but [a new Cato Institute study](#) says not so fast.

The study finds that the movement has been dominated by a strong “functionally libertarian” flavor since its inception, downplaying social issues such as gay marriage in favor of reforming entitlements, taxes and reigning in the scope of government.

Libertarians are defined as individuals “who believe that the federal government should have ‘less’ involvement in business and ‘less effect’ on ‘American lives,’” according to the study.

It establishes that the Tea Party movement grew out of libertarian frustration with former President George W. Bush’s fiscal policies, particularly the TARP bank bailouts and their frustration with the subsequent bailouts – issues polls cited by the study found that libertarians were angrier about than many conservatives.

Even [Christian Broadcasting Network political correspondent David Brody](#) [conceded in his recent book “Teavangelicals”](#) that evangelical activists and other social conservatives who are active in the Tea Party act like libertarians and have mostly downplayed social issues for the sake of the cause, according to the study.

“[S]ince the Tea Party was “founded on economic bedrock issues, evangelicals typically gloss over these differences for the sake of standing in unison to fight a worthy, fiscally disciplined cause,” the Cato report says.

Study authors David Kirby and Emily Ekins contend that the movement shows that the center of American politics has moved in a more libertarian direction. They cite numerous polls showing that Tea Party members say that economic issues are more important than social issues.

A [February 2011 Pew study](#), they say, found that “support for the tea party is not synonymous with support of the religious right,” noting that 46 percent had not heard of or had an opinion about the Christian right.

But the study finds a strong distinction between those it calls “Tea Party conservatives” and “Tea Party libertarians” when it comes to worries about social issues. A *New York Times* Tea Party survey cited in the study found that 91 percent of Tea Partiers who identify as libertarians say that taxes and jobs are more important to them than taxes and gay marriage – with less than 1 percent saying “religious values” are the most important issue.

Libertarians’ differences with conservatives over social issues within the movement has occasionally flared up, such as happened at the 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference when several conservative organizations boycotted the event due to the inclusion of GOProud, a gay Republican group.

Faith and Freedom Coalition Executive Director Gary Marx reacted to the study saying tensions between conservatives and libertarians are nothing new, but that the Tea Party has made it possible for both groups to agree and work together on issues in a way they have never done before.

“Both Tea Party libertarians and conservatives are extremely concerned about cutting federal government spending, reducing the size of government and repealing Obama’s health care reform,” the report said. “Three-quarters of tea partiers believe that the economy would have improved without the TARP bank bailouts, according to *New York Times* data.”

The authors suggests 2012 primary victories around the country show that libertarians have gained the upper hand in the movement over social conservatives, which they say was particularly true in Rick Santorum’s inability to beat Mitt Romney and other primaries around the country.

By [John Rossomando](#) /// August 6, 2012