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The Libertarian Intelligentsia Is Freaking Out Over Newt

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Libertarians in Washington are not happy about how the Republican primary is shaping up. Barring a miracle, there are two candidates with a decent shot at the nomination. Mitt Romney, the godfather of Obamacare, is not libertarians' first choice. And they think Newt Gingrich, the new frontrunner, is even worse.

On Monday, Christopher Barron, a Republican strategist with libertarian leanings and head of GOProud, which represents gay conservatives, [penned](#) an op-ed mourning Herman Cain's exit from the race. In his stead, Barron endorsed Gary Johnson, the libertarian former governor of New Mexico.

Now, many of Cain's supporters had tea party inclinations, and the latest polling suggests many of them are [swinging Newt's way](#). Barron thinks that's a terrible mistake.

"Newt is the establishment. He's antithetical to what the Tea Party is talking about," explains Barron. "This is about building on the Tea Party's success. It would take a lot of selective amnesia" to think Newt could represent the Tea Party's agenda.

Since the advent of the Tea Party in 2009, libertarians finally began to feel more at home with the right. The Republican Party, at least its rhetoric, was taking on a libertarian tone. They talked about lower taxes, shrinking the size of government, and constitutional originalism, which in theory would eliminate a lot of government regulations libertarians feel interfere with the free market. In Washington, the libertarian Cato Institute embraced the new movement, with events like a September 2010 book forum with Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe of FreedomWorks on their book, *Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto*. But Republicans' enthusiasm for libertarian ideals has not translated into the primary field, and libertarians are putting out a host of articles in conservative publications this week now that Newt Gingrich could end up with the nomination.

"There's a belief that the field represents a pre-Tea Party Republicanism," said Michael D. Tanner, a senior research fellow at the Libertarian Cato Institute. It's a crop of left-overs, he explains. Libertarians wanted Paul Ryan or Chris Christie. Instead, they got "pre-Tea Party folks." Tanner [wrote](#) an op-ed last week in National Review Online on both Romney and Gingrich's brand of Bush-era, big government conservatism. "Gingrich has been held in low-esteem by libertarians for a long time."

But outside Washington, where voters are less in tune with Cato, Tea Partiers looking for a candidate — having moved past their Michele Bachmann and Herman Cain phases — are taking a second look at Gingrich and he's surging in the polls. "Those at Cato and Reason [magazine] are much more informed," says David Boaz, a vice president at Cato. "People who have looked at their records would not like them." But, he can see why libertarian-leaning voters would like Gingrich "if they are not well-informed."

This week, Cato vice president Gene Healy penned a piece in the Washington Examiner urging conservatives not to settle on Newt. "Newt's hardly the 'anti-Romney,'" Healy cautions, "he's Mitt Romney with more baggage."

According to Healy, Gingrich's opposition to Paul Ryan's budget, which remade Medicare into a private coverage system, betrayed an "irresponsible approach toward entitlements." When it comes to foreign policy, Healy reminds us, in 2009 Newt "proposed zapping a North Korean missile site with laser weapons." Boaz concurs: "Gingrich looks like a volatile guy to have his finger on the button." The libertarian magazine Reason has been in full anti-Newt gear this week as well. In one article titled "Appalling Moments in Newtspeak," Jacob Sullum [reminds](#) readers of Gingrich's willingness to compromise civil liberties in the name of national security.

While less than perfect, libertarians are hoping for a Jon Huntsman resurgence to spare them from Newt and Mitt. "I think there is burgeoning interest in Jon Huntsman," says Boaz, though perhaps "too late to matter." While not a card-carrying libertarian, says Tanner, he possesses the right combination of a very conservative economic agenda and more moderate positions on foreign policy and social issues.

But a candidate Romney or God-forbid Gingrich is more likely. Libertarian blogger Will Wilkinson expressed the libertarian frustration with Newt Gingrich with a little dramatic flair on Twitter Monday: "If Newt Gingrich becomes president, we all deserve to die in a purifying fire."