

# The Volokh Conspiracy

## *The Tea Party and Libertarianism*

Ilya Somin • September 7, 2012 4:35 pm

In [this recent Cato Institute paper](#), Emily Ekins and David Kirby make an impressive case that the Tea Party movement is “functionally libertarian” force within the GOP. They collect extensive survey data showing that about half of self-identified Tea Party supporters are libertarian rather than social conservative (they support individual freedom on the social as well as the economic realm). They also show that the movement has largely focused on fiscal and economic policy issues, to the exclusion of traditional social conservative issues such as abortion and gay marriage. Finally, the present data showing that Tea Party voters have pushed the party in a libertarian direction in contested Republican primaries, supporting relatively pro-small government candidates even against strong social conservatives who were more statist on economic issues.

I advanced a similar interpretation of the Tea Party phenomenon in [this article](#) early last year. But Ekins’ and Kirby’s paper has the advantage of utilizing a wide range of additional survey data that was not yet available in early 2011.

The one issue on which I think they are not persuasive is in explaining why Rick Santorum got a high percentage of the Tea Party vote in the Republican presidential primaries, even though he is [the very epitome of anti-libertarian big government conservatism](#), even going so far as to denounce “this whole idea of personal autonomy.” Tea Party support for Santorum counts against Ekins and Kirby’s thesis (and mine).

This question deserves more research. But I suspect that [political ignorance](#) may have been a factor. In the primaries, Santorum did not talk about his big government record, and instead stressed how he was generally more conservative than Mitt Romney, including claiming to be more fiscally conservative. He even went so far as to claim that his campaign was about promoting “freedom.” And the media often went along with Santorum’s line on this point, often portraying him as the conservative candidate across the board, without focusing on his big government record on economic issues.

Primary voters are generally better-informed and more interested in politics than general election voters. But it’s quite possible that many Tea Party primary voters were unfamiliar with the details of Santorum’s record, and therefore just assumed that he was a free marketeer on economic issues. Obviously, Mitt Romney’s own far from libertarian record on economic policy might have led some primary voters to view Santorum (wrongly, in my view) as a lesser evil.

How much of a libertarian impact the Tea Party will ultimately have remains to be seen. As I noted in my 2011 article, it's possible the movement will peter out, get coopted by the socially conservative GOP establishment, or simply fail to gain enough political traction to influence policy any more than it already has. But Ekins and Kirby do make a strong case that the Tea Party has a strong libertarian element, and that it has pushed the GOP in a more libertarian direction over the last two years.

UPDATE: I should emphasize that neither Ekins and Kirby nor I are suggesting that the GOP has turned fully libertarian, or anywhere close to it. All we are saying about the Tea Party's political influence is that it has made the Republicans somewhat more libertarian than they would have been otherwise.

UPDATE #2: I made a slight error in quoting Santorum's negative view of individual freedom (though not one that affected the bottom line point that he denounced it). I have now corrected the