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All about libertarians: Group's mystique increases as profile is raised

By Emily Esfahani Smith - October 16, 2012

If you've ever observed a group of libertarians at a bar — perhaps discussing objectivism, the Second Amendment, or marijuana, all with reverence — then you know that they are a species of political being unlike the rest of us.

But they are an important group to understand this election cycle, as topics such as the economy, the size of government and entitlements take center stage (and “Atlas Shrugged: Part II” opens in movie theaters nationwide). According to Gallup, libertarians make up about 20 percent of the electorate — and they are a vocal and influential minority, as the tea party movement has shown. The ascent of the “Atlas Shrugged”-loving Paul Ryan to the Republican ticket is another indication that the libertarian movement may be in the midst of its political moment.

But what exactly do libertarians believe?

Psychologists Ravi Iyer, Spassena Koleva, Jesse Graham, Peter Ditto and Jonathan Haidt set out to answer this very question in the largest study of libertarians to date, “Understanding Libertarian Morality,” published recently in the scientific journal PLOS ONE.

After surveying nearly 12,000 self-identified libertarians, the researchers determined that libertarians have a set of moral values that are distinct from those held by ordinary conservatives and liberals.

It's well known that libertarians hold fiscally conservative and socially liberal views. What is less known is that libertarians, in prizing liberty above all else, place less emphasis than others, according to the study, on caring for others, avoiding harm, behaving benevolently and acting altruistically — values that traditionally have defined virtuous and heroic behavior in nearly all of the moral systems of the world.

This calls to mind the muse of the contemporary libertarian movement, Ayn Rand, and her provocative position that altruists, far from being the self-sacrificing heroes that our culture makes them out to be, are “evil.” One who commits an altruistic act is, for Rand, like one who sacrifices his life in suicide — a madman or a fool.

“If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject,” Rand argued.

In his bestselling book “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion” (2012), Mr. Haidt, a co-author of the libertarian study, breaks down the foundational moral principles that shape liberal, conservative and libertarian ideology. According to research Mr. Haidt has conducted, liberals rely on three of the six core moral foundations: care, liberty and fairness. Conservatives rely on all six — the three that liberals favor plus sanctity, loyalty and authority.

Libertarians have the narrowest moral sense, relying on only one of the six universal moral foundations — liberty. Revealingly, they score lower than both conservatives and liberals on measures of care for others and protecting others from harm. What libertarians do care about, almost to the exclusion of all else, is individual rights — the group’s “sacred value,” according to the study. Mr. Iyer and his colleagues found that the most prominent feature of libertarians is “self-direction” — or independence.

“They are less groupish, less likely to coalesce and subject themselves to party discipline,” Mr. Haidt says. Libertarians also tend to be less social than most.

The libertarian reliance on liberty and self, however, comes at a social cost. According to the study, libertarians showed lower than other groups on levels of loving feelings toward their families, friends, romantic partners and generic others, which brings to mind another gem from Rand: “To say ‘I love you’ one must first know how to say the ‘I.’”

The libertarian style of thinking can even verge, in extreme cases, on autism.

The University of Cambridge-based psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, a leading autism researcher, famously has shown that people with autism exhibit two critical features: They test exceptionally low on empathizing scales and exceptionally high on systemizing ones. Empathizing governs social relationships — Are you able to relate to other people? — while systemizing governs understanding and analysis of the outside world. Everyone falls somewhere on the empathizing-systemizing scale.

Libertarians score very low on the empathizing scale and very high on the systemizing scale. In other words, they are highly rational moral thinkers, less emotional than both conservatives and liberals. Two of the leading moral thinkers of Western history — utilitarian Jeremy Bentham and deontologist Immanuel Kant — were also incredibly gifted systemizers but deficient empathizers. Today, Bentham and arguably Kant would might be diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome.

There are upsides to such a coolly analytic cognitive style. For instance, libertarians are better at logic problems, says Mr. Iyer, a research scientist at the University of Southern California and the lead author of this study. The downsides include a “greater susceptibility to autism,” he says.

“Any ideology or philosophy, taken to an extreme, likely resembles some pathology or another,” Mr. Iyer explains.

Prominent libertarians object to the study’s findings that their beliefs are morally and politically monochromatic. David Boaz, vice president of flagship libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, says that he sees “no evidence that libertarians display less love, compassion or morality than other people.”

Legal scholar Richard Epstein, Mr. Haidt's colleague at New York University, agrees, noting that libertarians make a distinction between the political and personal world when responding to such questionnaires. Libertarians believe, Mr. Epstein says, that liberty is the guiding value on matters of public policy while "allowing for the personal values to dominate [personal] interactions."