

# The Washington Post

## Libertarian Democrats: A movement in search of a leader

By: Aaron Blake – August 1, 2013

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Lost amid all the hubbub about Rand Paul and Chris Christie's war of words over NSA security programs and the rising strain of Republican libertarianism is this:

A similar divide is alive and well in the Democratic Party — arguably just as much in the GOP (if not more).

Several Democrats from this movement will meet at the White House this afternoon to discuss their concerns with President Obama and Republicans.

For evidence of the widespread uneasiness on the left, one need look no further than the vote in the House last week to defund the NSA's phone record collection program. While much was made of the fact that nearly half of Republicans voted for the measure, it's just as notable that 111 of 194 Democrats did the same.

In other words, well more than half the House Democratic conference voted to defund a surveillance program overseen by a president of their own party. That's a pretty stunning fact that has gotten lost in the current debate.

So why hasn't this issue played out on the Democratic side like it has on the Republican side (i.e. in full view)?

Put plainly: It's a movement in search of a leader. There isn't one big nationally known player on the left that is pushing this issue in a way that Paul is on the right.

For now, the de facto leaders of the left's effort to rein in the Obama Administration's surveillance programs are Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and, arguably, the journalist who has been working with Edward Snowden to reveal the programs, Glenn Greenwald. While these two have been pushing the issue hard, they aren't exactly political figures with huge built-in constituencies.

Aside from those two, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) has been talking about ways to make the programs better, working as a bridge between libertarian-leaning Democrats and the Obama Administration (she wrote a Washington Post op-ed to that effect earlier this week). But, as Senate Intelligence Committee chairwoman, Feinstein is hardly a libertarian leader on the left.

As with Feinstein, discussions on this issue within the Democratic Party have taken place largely under the radar, and no potential 2016 Democratic presidential candidates have taken up the mantle of the libertarians, as Paul has on the right.

That's despite the fact that polling shows a sizeable constituency for just such a candidate. A Washington Post-ABC News poll last week showed very similar levels of privacy concerns in both parties, with more than six in 10 of both liberal and moderate Democrats saying the NSA's surveillance programs intrude on Americans' privacy.

Privacy concerns in the Democratic Party have waned — predictably — since Obama took office, but there remains a sizeable constituency for a potential 2016 contender to take advantage of — particularly given two possible candidates closely tied to the administration's national security programs (Hillary Clinton and Vice President Biden) currently lead the field of contenders.

Julian Sanchez, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Wyden is doing yeoman's work, but acknowledged that he's "not really a rabble rouser in the mold of someone like Rand Paul." He said that part of the reason the GOP's infighting makes news is because it's a transitional phase for the party.

While Republicans were very hawkish during George W. Bush's presidency, Democrats have long been conflicted on issues of privacy and national security.

"Now that [GOP concerns are] finally being voiced, it sounds louder in contrast with the previous silence, and may even *be* a bit louder for having been pent up all this time," Sanchez said. "And so it's natural to note that more than the somewhat hoarse-voiced and weary objections from civil libertarians on the left who've been shouting since 2002."

Potential 2016 contenders who could take up this mantle include noted liberals like Howard Dean or even Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.). But Dean hasn't been a major figure in the Democratic Party for a while now, and Warren has close ties to the Obama Administration, which would seem to make her less likely to buck it on these issues.

It's not at all clear that this leader will even emerge, but if they do, they could quickly build a pretty significant profile.