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John Hood's Daily Journal

Grasping the Libertarian Vote

By [John Hood](#)



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RALEIGH – I know quite a few Libertarians. But I know many, many more libertarians. That difference between the upper case and the lower case adds up to millions of votes – and lots of misunderstanding.

The Libertarian Party was founded in 1971 by intellectuals and activists espousing several distinguishable but often-allied strands of thought, from Ayn Rand Objectivists and John Locke-style classical liberals to free-market economists of the Austrian and Chicago schools. The party has run presidential candidates ever since. In many states, Libertarians have also made the ballot in other federal, state, and local contests.

These candidates typically receive only a small fraction of the vote. Occasionally, however, they win. Some 200 Libertarians are currently serving in elective office across the country. Somewhat more often, the fraction of votes that Libertarians pull is large enough that, it is argued, they keep Republican candidates from winning close races.

Why is it assumed that most voters who chose Libertarian candidates would otherwise vote Republican? Here's where the distinction between Libertarian and libertarian comes into play. While truly active membership in the Libertarian Party can be counted in the thousands, and votes cast for Libertarian presidential candidates can be counted in the hundreds of thousands, the number of libertarian voters in the United States is in the tens of millions, according to national polls and analysis by the Cato Institute's David Boaz and David Kirby.

In a 2006 [paper](#) and a 2010 [update](#), Boaz and Kirby employ data from Gallup, *The Washington Post*, the American National Election Study, and other sources to estimate the size of the libertarian vote. It depends on the source and screen used to define libertarian, but the bloc is somewhere between 10 percent and 25 percent of voters. You get the lower number if you screen tightly for voters consistent in their support for small government in both economics and social policy. You get the larger number if you include voters who express support for low taxes, less regulation, and social toleration most of the time.

Most people who write about politics, including me, employ the Left-Center-Right spectrum for describing political candidates and ideas. It's a reasonable accommodation of the common vocabulary as long as you remember that these labels describe political **coalitions**, not pristine ideological categories. So, for example, the Left includes: 1) secular voters in Manhattan who don't much like the capital-gains tax but detest religious conservatism even more, 2) deeply religious black voters in Mississippi who oppose abortion and gay marriage, and 3) moderates in Missouri who think that giving tax money to big corporations proves they are pro-business.

On the Right, the coalition includes most libertarian voters as well as social conservatives and hawks. On both sides of the

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spectrum, then, groups of voters who disagree on much nevertheless cohere in organizations, movements, and parties because of shared interests. Sometimes the coalitions are strained by events or explosive controversies. In modern times, though, these coalitions have proved to be remarkably stable.

In electoral politics, the libertarian vote is mostly a Republican constituency (sorry, Libertarians). In recent decades, libertarians have on average split about 70-30 for Republican candidates. But the variations are interesting. Libertarian voters strongly support George W. Bush in 2000, at 72 percent, but by 2004 his libertarian support had dropped to 59 percent – still a clear majority, and obviously not sufficient to tip the outcome, but nevertheless an indicator of libertarian disaffection with his Medicare expansion, the Patriot Act, and other policies.












Something similar happened in the congressional races of 2006. Libertarian voters gave 54 percent support to GOP candidates for the U.S. House that year, down from 73 percent in 2000 and 70 percent in 2002. It's quite possible that the votes received by Libertarian candidates in the 2006 Senate races in Montana and Missouri cost those Republican incumbents their reelection. As Boaz and Kirby [argue](#), however, the dynamic is far broader than that.

I'm on record opposing North Carolina's restrictive access laws that make it too costly for Libertarians and other alternative parties to place candidates on the ballot. It's a matter of [constitutional principle](#) and simple fairness. But that doesn't mean I think third parties are likely to transform politics. Most libertarians will continue to choose between the two major parties – and most Republicans who want to win elections will need to work hard to keep libertarians in their coalition.

It's hardly an impossible task. There are few Republican politicians more disliked by libertarian intellectuals than John McCain, but he ended up winning 71 percent support among libertarian voters in 2008. They disliked his opponent even more. That's the nature of coalition politics.

Hood is president of the John Locke Foundation

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