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# Libertarians lead Independent shift from Obama

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By DAVID KIRBY & DAVID BOAZ | 4/19/10 4:56 AM EDT



Republican Sen. Scott Brown won 65 percent of Massachusetts independents by emphasizing fiscal issues and playing down social ones. *AP*

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Who are these centrist, independent-minded voters who swung the elections in Virginia, New Jersey and Massachusetts to Republican candidates and are likely to be crucial in races this fall?

Political analysts are searching for a name. They have tried “tea partier,” “populist,” “conservative,” even “strange and unpredictable.”

None of these fits, however.

These voters are neither populist nor conservative. But many may be libertarian — fiscally conservative but socially liberal or tolerant.

A careful look at polling data shows these voters may be less mysterious than analysts think. Libertarians seem to be a leading indicator of this trend in centrist, independent-minded voters, based on an analysis of many years of polling data. We estimate that libertarians compose from 14 percent to 23 percent of voters nationally. They are among the few real swing voters in U.S. politics.

Libertarian voters are often torn between their aversion to the Republicans’ social conservatism and the Democrats’ fiscal irresponsibility.

These days, they are angry about spending, deficits and government takeovers — but less motivated by social issues. Libertarians are slightly more likely to be male, white, independent and moderate than the general public.

In the past, libertarians often voted Republican as often as 70 percent of the time.

But through the Bush years, Republicans expanded entitlements and spent taxpayers’ money faster than Democrats. This gave libertarians less reason to stick with them.

In fact, polls in 2004 and 2006 showed libertarian voters moving toward the Democrats. They may well have cost Republicans control of Congress.

But then, according to our new data, libertarians voted against Barack Obama in 2008. They feared the combination of a Democratic president and a Democratic Congress in a time of financial crisis.

Massachusetts polls confirmed this libertarian shift among independents.

A Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation-Harvard University poll found that Scott

Brown won 65 percent of independents to Martha Coakley's 34 percent, just 14 months after Obama carried 57 percent of Massachusetts independents.

In addition, 63 percent of 2008 Massachusetts voters agreed that government should do more to solve problems. That number was down to 50 percent in the January special election — with 47 percent saying government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals.

Most libertarians voted Republican in 2008. But younger libertarians joined other young voters in supporting Obama.

This had shifted by the special election, however.

A POLITICO/Insider Advantage poll showed Brown leading among voters younger than 30 by 61 percent to 30 percent. In contrast, the 2008 exit poll showed 18-to-29-year-olds in Massachusetts voting for Obama 78 percent to 20 percent.

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