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The Libertarian Vote

Ilya Somin • January 21, 2010 3:51 pm

David Kirby and David Boaz have published a new Cato Institute study estimating the size of the “libertarian vote.” They conclude that about 14% of American voters are libertarian in the sense of broadly opposing government regulation in both the economic and social realms. As a libertarian think tank, Cato obviously has a strong interest in coming up with a high estimate of the number of libertarian voters. However, Boaz and Kirby rely on polling questions from the National Election Study, a widely respected comprehensive survey of American political opinion developed by primarily liberal political scientists. They also note that other research by Gallup and Zogby comes up with higher estimates for the number of libertarian voters (20 to 25 percent). Other recent surveys show that the vast majority of Americans prefer smaller government with fewer services to larger government with more services (58 to 38 percent), and that trust in government is generally low.

Obviously, most libertarian voters in the general population are not as radical in rejecting government intervention as many libertarian intellectuals are. But they do seem to favor substantial reductions in the size and scope of government relative to current levels. We intellectuals should not be too troubled by this. Conservative and liberal voters aren’t as ideologically consistent as their intellectual counterparts either.

Kirby and Boaz point out that libertarian voters generally lack a strong sense of identification with either party, and therefore are often a swing vote in elections. Obviously, very few of these voters identify with the tiny Libertarian Party either. It is true, of course, that most of these voters may not think of themselves as “libertarian” and many of them probably don’t even know the word. They are like

the proverbial man who has been speaking prose all his life without knowing it. Several decades of studies going back to Converse's classic work also show that most voters don't have a good understanding of the meaning of "liberal" and "conservative" either.

Kirby and Boaz's previous work on this subject suggests that libertarian voters tend to have higher education and income levels than the general population. This is consistent with other studies showing that increasing political knowledge tends to push opinion in a more libertarian direction, controlling for other variables. A key task for libertarian activists and intellectuals is to do a better job of mobilizing this libertarian constituency. In general, educated and affluent voters are easier to mobilize than those who are not.

In addition, we should work harder to get voters to connect their general distrust of government with specific issues. Here, the research on political knowledge is significant, since it shows that increasing knowledge translates to more libertarian positions on specific issues, as well as on general attitudes towards government. This is not to say that knowing more about politics necessarily turns you into a consistent libertarian; in most cases, it doesn't. But, on average, it does tend to make people more libertarian than they would be otherwise.

Finally, I should reiterate my earlier view that the Libertarian Party is not a good vehicle for mobilizing the libertarian vote (see here and here), as proven by its dismal failures over more than 35 years. Rather, libertarians should work to increase their influence over the two major parties by mobilizing their constituency more effectively. With its substantial libertarian component, the Tea Party movement is an interesting start. But much more remains to be done.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST WATCH: I should perhaps note that I am a Cato Institute adjunct scholar, which is an unpaid position.

Categories: Libertarianism, Political Ignorance

39 Comments

1.

Mark N. says:

An interesting question is then why, besides the Libertarian Party's ineptitude, libertarianism hasn't been somewhat more successful in either party. One answer might be that 14% just isn't enough to not be swamped by other groups. Another might be that it isn't seen as enough of a swing vote to be worth campaigning for; my guess is that many libertarians are either "left" or "right" libertarians who mainly vote for one of the two major parties and don't frequently change which of them they vote for (the "guns/taxes" v. "pot/speech" contingents). A third might be that people are really not as