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Libertarian Electoral Fantasies

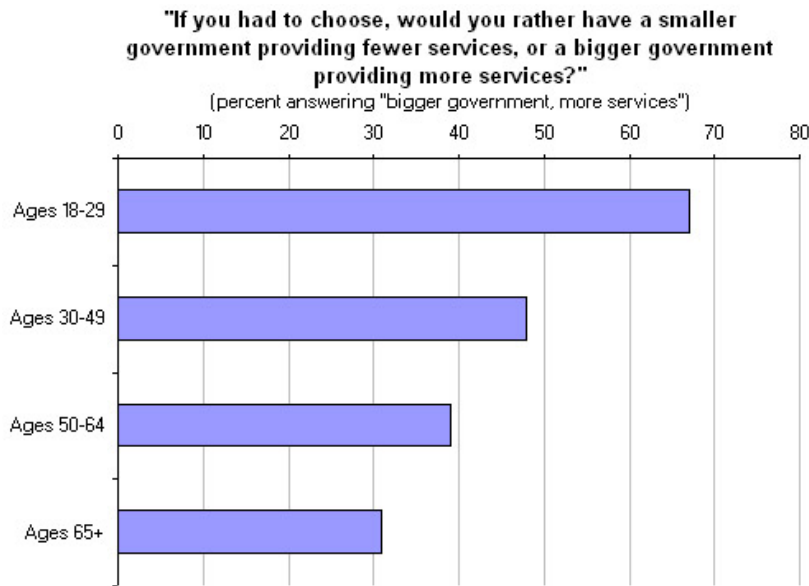
Jonathan Chait April 8, 2010 | 11:50 am

Cato's Will Wilkinson **predicts** that a generation of younger, libertarian-leaning voters will takeover the Democratic Party and push it in a libertarian direction:

I think this might pose a problem for liberals like Chait, who continue to see moderate social democracy as the ideal of American liberal government. If libertarian-ish young people drift into the Democratic Party simply because they're grossed out by everything responsible for making Sarah Palin a hero, they'll have to be convinced by old-guard liberals that, say, turning Social Security and Medicare into forced savings programs defies all that is liberal and holy before the youngsters manage to convince other Democrats that this type of thing is a pretty good idea.

Wilkinson seems enchanted by the prospect of me in the future, shaking my cane at those damn kids taking over the Democratic Party with their loud music and fervent desire to privatize Social Security. I actually think that sounds like lots of fun. Sadly, it has little bearing on reality.

Despite Wilkinson's description of younger voters as "libertarian-ish," the reality is that young voters are far more pro-government than any other generation. This can be seen in the Pew Survey **report (PDF)** on Millenials, entitled "A Pro-Government, Socially Liberal Generation." It features data like this:



That's not very libertarian-ish at all, is it? And on Social Security, if George W. Bush couldn't convince Americans to privatize the program in 2005, after a 25-year bull market when stocks were widely assumed to be lucrative and safe, I don't see how anybody who lived through the current crisis is going to come around.

Indeed, when libertarians like Wilkinson talk about "libertarian-ish" voters in any context, they're leaning very, very heavily on the "ish." The most thorough breakdown of the electorate is Pew's voter **typology survey**, last conducted in 2005, which categorizes voters into nine basic groups. The overwhelming finding of this research is that the components of both electoral coalitions are far *less* libertarian than their parties -- the GOP coalition has a lot of hawkish or socially conservative voters who favor more economic activism, and the Democratic Party has a lot of social conservatives who are skeptical of immigration and gay marriage. The sorting of the parties is one reflection of the massive over-representation of libertarian-ish views among elites.

If you look at Pew's typology, principled anti-government economic views tend to hold only among voters who are also down-the-line conservatives. And that viewpoint is quite small. To be sure, most Americans will express opposition to government in the abstract, and don't want to pay higher taxes. They can be skeptical of government programs that they think will benefit other people at their own expense. But these sentiments shouldn't be confused with any principled opposition to government, at least not a principle that can survive contact with real-world questions. Raising taxes on the rich is **overwhelmingly popular**. In 2000, about 90% of the public **avored** adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare. The remaining 10% corresponds to what Pew calls "Enterprisers," which is the hard-core group of Republican partisans who are anti-government on economics, very hawkish and socially conservative.

Which is to say, people with principled opposition to economic activism and left-of-center social views or dovish foreign policy views aren't numerous enough to register.

Practically speaking, the libertarian vote is non-existent, while the opposite viewpoint -- economically liberal and socially conservative, which some call populist -- is quite large. This fact tends to get lost in the political discussion because the political discussion is run by elites who are far closer to libertarianism than the public as a whole. (Case in point: Press critic Jay Rosen recently **suggested** CNN divvy its evening lineup into left/right/libertarian blocs, ignoring the vastly larger populist segment of the electorate.) Populist voters simple lack any intellectual infrastructure whatsoever.

Now, this has no bearing on the intellectual value of libertarianism, which obviously is unrelated to its popularity. But it's worth keeping in mind when we discuss the electorate, because such discussions often operate under the mistaken assumption that there's an enormous pool of libertarian or libertarian-leaning voters ignored by the two-party system. The opposite is the case. If the parties were to restructure themselves so as to become more responsive to public opinion, then Democrats would move rightward on social issues, and Republicans leftward on economics.

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