

Libertarians in the mainline

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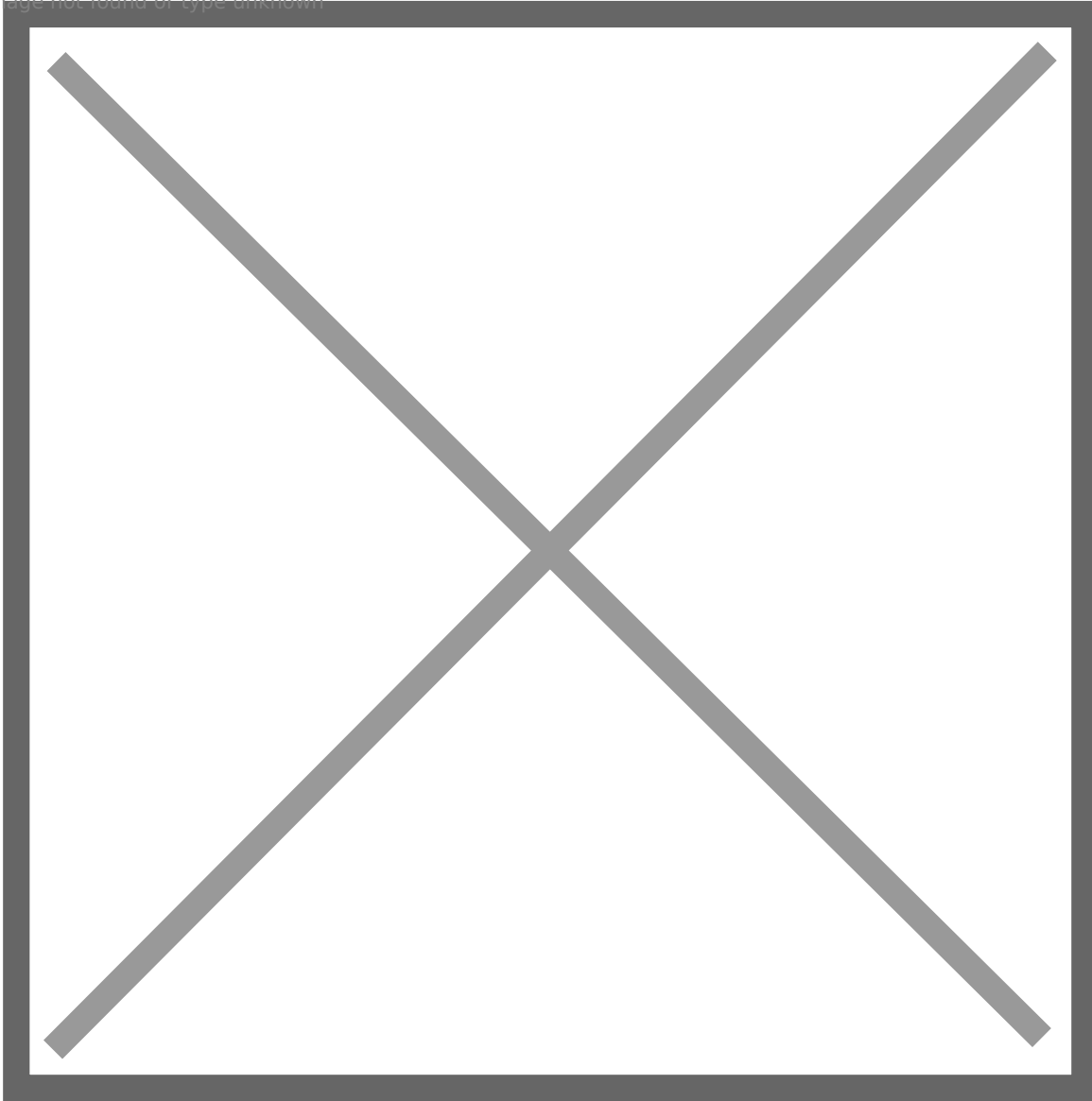
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Last week while I was away, [Tobin Grant linked to something interesting](#): new research, based on 40 years of General Social Surveys, that echoes [Grant's own parsing of Pew's Religious Landscapes Survey](#). In general:

- White evangelicals are socially and economically conservative
- Members of black churches are socially conservative and economically liberal
- Mainline Protestants are socially liberal and economically conservative

From a mainliner's perspective, the first takeaway here is that our people mostly map onto the "libertarian" quadrant of this graph:

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[One Episcopalian commented](#) that this reminds him of his church's reputation as "the Republican Party at prayer" 60 years ago. What it makes me think of is white Democrats in the last 25.

The Democratic Party and its mostly white leaders have generally supported abortion rights, and many came around publicly on LGBT rights before it was cool. But they've also favored business over labor and free trade over fair. It's been the party of welfare reform and charter schools, of public-private partnerships and deficit hawks. If the Republicans propose big cuts to a social program, as often as not the Democrats' rejoinder is *smaller* cuts. This is not what you would call a diametrically opposed economic vision.

Are mainliners "libertarians"? It would appear the word applies at least in the comparative, adjectival sense; someone who says they want less government involvement is more libertarian than someone who wants more. But as a noun it's a complicated word, as it's also self-applied by people whose views are often pretty far outside the mainstream of American politics. Combining a live-and-let-live approach to personal morality with a sense that government could be a little leaner and taxes a little lower—that's not a capital-"L" Libertarian. That's a Democrat who can get elected in a statewide race. That's mainstream U.S. politics.

Meanwhile, if you're an economic liberal—an actual one, someone people from other countries would recognize as a liberal—forget the pews, you're not that well represented in *Congress*. Senate Democrats are [creating a new leadership position for first-term senator Elizabeth Warren](#) so she can function as a liaison to the liberal advocacy community. If the Democratic leadership were already meaningfully liberal, this would of course be redundant.

So it isn't that surprising that racially and religiously privileged Americans—whatever their specific church tradition—lean to the right on economic issues. So does the bipartisan consensus in privileged Washington.

What is striking here are the gaps these graphs highlight: explicitly between white mainliners and black Protestants, and implicitly between white mainliners and many of their own leaders. Neither is news to any mainline pastor I know, but that doesn't mean it isn't a challenge.