

# Libertarian numbers small but they have clout

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [November 27, 2013](#) issue

The Public Religion Research Institute's annual American Values Survey, released October 29, examines libertarians to try to "pin down a group that doesn't fit on the traditional liberal-to-conservative spectrum," said Robert Jones, CEO of PRRI.

"We were not sure we could find a coherent group that could say they oppose making abortion more difficult and at the same time oppose raising the minimum wage. But we did."

Libertarians are just 7 percent of U.S. adults, but an additional 15 percent of Americans lean toward libertarian views—socially liberal, economically conservative. Seventeen percent of Americans said they lean toward the Tea Party. Most Americans (54 percent) hold a mixture of views, PRRI found.

[The survey of 2,317 U.S. adults was conducted September 21 to October 3, before the Tea Party-endorsed government shutdown.]

PRRI found libertarians are overwhelmingly (94 percent) non-Hispanic white and mostly male (68 percent). They're also young. The average age is 44, while the national average is 47; Tea Party folks' average is slightly older at 51.

On religion, libertarians tilt toward the mainline Protestants (27 percent) and the secular (27 percent say they have no religious identity). Eleven percent are Catholic, 6 percent are identified with a non-Christian faith and 4 percent named another Christian group. (The tally is less than 100 percent due to rounding.)

But libertarians are like Tea Party adherents (chiefly white evangelicals and Catholics) in one respect: politically, they have the capacity to punch above their weight. "There are opportunities for libertarians to play a bigger role in primaries," said Jones, even though only 8 percent of libertarians identify specifically with the Libertarian Party.

One opportunity was Virginia's governor race, in which Libertarian Party candidate Robert Sarvis potentially hurt the Republican candidate, Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, by siphoning off young white male voters, possibly helping Democratic candidate—and eventual winner—Terry McAuliffe.

“In any race where there's a libertarian, the candidate that stands to lose votes is the Republican candidate. Only 5 percent of libertarians call themselves Democrats, but 45 percent call themselves Republican,” Jones said.

The survey used two methods to identify libertarians—self-identification and a spectrum of questions on economic and social issues. Although 13 percent of Americans called themselves libertarian, “we found the label is fairly loosely held,” said Jones. Only 7 percent qualified by the scale of viewpoints that PRRI developed.

Some observers have detected an overlap between the Tea Party and libertarians. David Kirby, a vice president of FreedomWorks, and Emily McClintock Ekins, polling director for the Reason Foundation, wrote for the Cato Institute on the libertarian roots of the Tea Party. Looking at the 2008 elections, they concluded it was libertarian anger with the GOP and pessimism and frustration with government that plowed the ideological ground for the Tea Party.

“We would disagree on this. We just don't see it,” said Jones. “These are groups that overlap on some issues but are largely very dissimilar.”

Among other PRRI findings:

- There is a notable exception to the generally socially liberal views of libertarians. On legalizing same-sex marriage, 59 percent oppose it. This may reflect that two in three libertarians are men and 63 percent of libertarian men oppose gay marriage; libertarian women were evenly divided on the issue.
- Most libertarians (61 percent) do not consider themselves a part of the Tea Party movement and only one in four Tea Party people would call themselves libertarian.
- Only 22 percent of libertarians say they belong to the religious right or conservative Christian movement, which is “overwhelmingly made up of white evangelicals and white Catholics,” said Jones. Most Tea Party followers (52 percent) say they are part of the Christian right.

- Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Tex.) is the Tea Party's preferred presidential candidate for 2016 among registered voters, while libertarians lean toward Sen. Rand Paul (R., Ky.).
- While they line up with the Tea Party in opposition to government involvement in the economy, health care and environmental protections, 70 percent of libertarians "favor allowing doctors to prescribe lethal drugs to help terminally ill patients end their lives, and a nearly identical number (71 percent) favor legalizing marijuana."
- Where the Tea Party and libertarians coincide, libertarians often hold a markedly more intense position. Their opposition to the Affordable Care Act is fiercer: 96 percent of libertarians oppose it, compared with 78 percent of Tea Party followers. Similarly, 65 percent of libertarians but only 57 percent of Tea Party followers oppose raising the minimum wage. —RNS

*This article was edited on November 12, 2013.*