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January/February 2007

# Policy Report

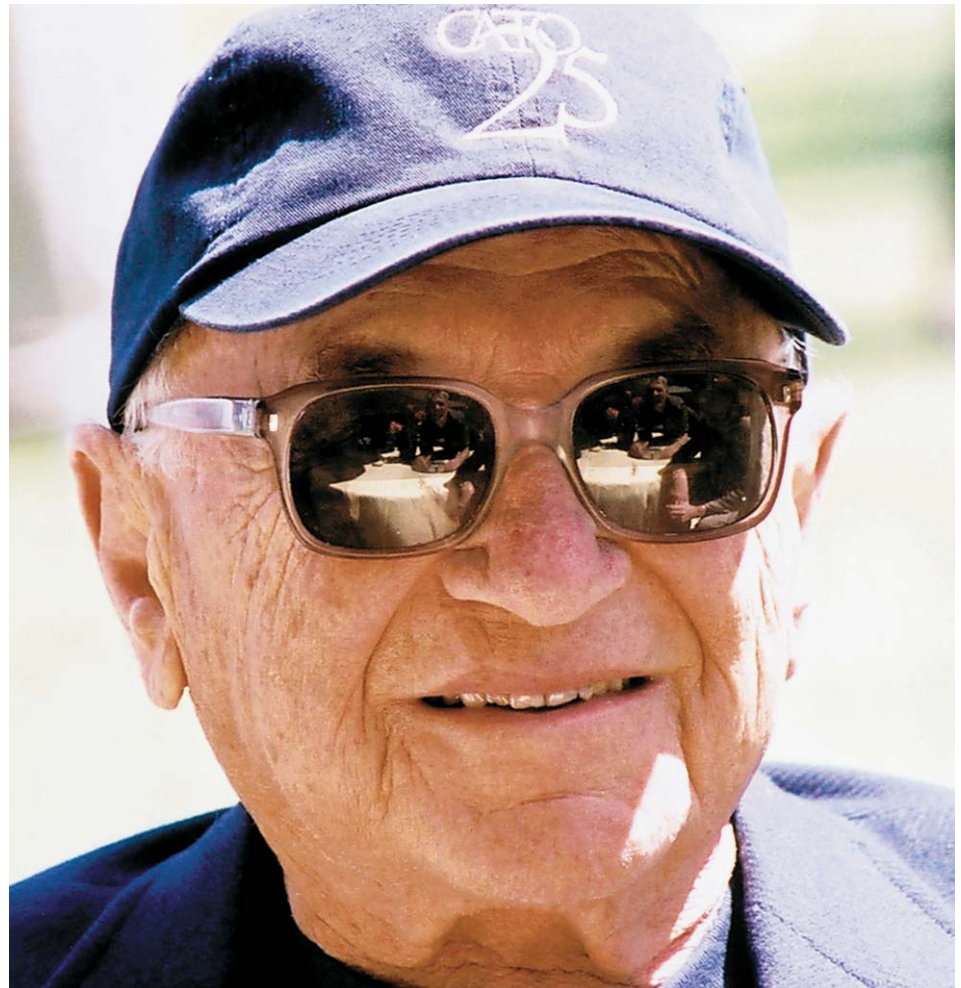
Vol. XXIX No. 1

## Libertarian Voters in 2004 and 2006

BY DAVID BOAZ AND DAVID KIRBY

**D**id libertarians swing the 2006 election? Election and poll results suggest it's possible. While partisans still voted along party lines, Republicans lost big among independents. By our analysis, libertarians may be the largest bloc of such independent-minded swing voters. Particularly in states with high concentrations of libertarians such as Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Montana, and New Hampshire, disaffected libertarians likely cost Republicans House and Senate seats. But an obsession with political polarization and the red-blue divide has prevented most pundits from seeing the impact of libertarian-leaning voters.

Ever since the impeachment of President Clinton and the Florida ballot problems in 2000, we've been told that we're a polarized nation, sharply split between "red state" Republicans and "blue state" Democrats. And the rise of blogs has intensified that sense, by allowing people to get their daily, even hourly, dose of the liberal or conservative party line. **CONT'D ON PAGE 14**



**M**ilton Friedman, perhaps the greatest champion of freedom of the past half century, passed away November 16 at the age of 94. In this issue we remember his long association with the Cato Institute, from smuggling books into Poland in 1982 to the awarding of the third Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty in 2006. Above, Milton Friedman in his Cato 25 cap at the Cato Sponsors Picnic after the Cato Institute's 25th Anniversary Dinner in 2002, at which the first Friedman Prize was awarded. **MORE ON PAGE 4**

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But in fact millions of people don't fit the liberal-conservative dichotomy. They may be fiscally conservative and socially liberal (or tolerant), that is, broadly libertarian. Or they may be liberal on economic issues and conservative on issues of personal freedom, and we might call them statist or populist. Either way, they don't fit neatly into the liberal or conservative box, and they often find themselves torn between conservative Republican and liberal Democratic candidates for office.

### American Ideologies: A Four-Way Matrix

		Government Intervention in Economic Affairs	
		For	Against
Expansion of Personal Freedoms	For	Liberal	Libertarian
	Against	Populist	Conservative

Source: William S. Maddox and Stuart A. Lilie, *Beyond Liberal and Conservative* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1984), p. 5.

Several recent polls suggest that 10 to 20 percent of Americans fall into the libertarian quadrant. Indeed, libertarians are a bigger share of the electorate than the much-discussed "soccer moms" or "NASCAR dads," and they are increasingly a swing vote. Over the past six years Republicans have expanded entitlements and spent taxpayers' money faster than Democrats, giving libertarians less reason to stick with their traditional voting patterns. Polls show that in both 2004 and 2006 libertarian voters shifted toward the Democrats, and they may well have cost Republicans control of Congress.

Why is this substantial and growing libertarian strength not better recognized? Political scientists have taught for more than 50 years that politics is arranged on a liberal-conservative continuum, so we're all used to that. And indeed, political activists and elected officials do seem to have arranged themselves into those two camps, rather than a more accurate reflection of

the total electorate. Because of the constant repetition of the liberal-conservative spectrum, most libertarian-minded voters don't identify themselves as libertarians, and they aren't organized in libertarian groups. But it's time for pundits, pollsters, and politicians to pay more attention to the libertarian vote.

### Libertarians Today

For more than a dozen years now, the Gallup Poll has been using two broad questions to categorize respondents by ideology about economic and social freedom. Gallup consistently finds about 20 percent of respondents to be libertarian. In 2006 they found 21 percent libertarians, along with 21 percent liberals, 20 percent populists, and 25 percent conservatives (12 percent were unclassifiable). Adding a third question from the Gallup survey to create a more robust definition, we found that 13 percent of Gallup's 2006 respondents could be classified as libertarians.

Using similar questions from the Pew Research Center, we found 14 percent libertarians. And from the generally acknowledged gold standard of public opinion data, the surveys of the American National Election Studies, which has asked the same questions for 15 years, we selected three questions about political attitudes. Using those questions, we found that in 2004 libertarians were 13 percent of the voting-age population and 15 percent of actual voters.

After publishing that study, we commissioned Zogby International to ask the same ANES questions to 1,012 actual (reported) voters in the 2006 election. Once again, we found that 15 percent of them could be defined as libertarian on our three-question screen.

### Swinging Libertarians

So how do libertarians vote? That's the bottom line for candidates and consultants. We find good evidence not only that libertarians exist, and that they vote, but that their votes are currently in flux. Libertarians may be the next great swing vote.

Given the dominance of fiscal and economic issues over the past generation, it is perhaps not surprising that libertarians have tended to vote Republican. Using ANES data, we find that libertarians have voted heavily Republican in recent presidential elections, but with interesting variations. In 1988, given a choice between George H. W. Bush's watered-down Reaganism and Michael Dukakis's combination of big-government orthodoxy and "card-carrying membership in the ACLU," libertarians voted 74 to 26 percent for Bush. In 2000 libertarians gave 72 percent of their votes to George W. Bush, who said every day on the campaign trail, "My opponent trusts government. I trust you," and only 20 percent to Al Gore, of whom Bush's claim seemed entirely too accurate.

But in 1992, after the senior Bush's tax increase, libertarians split their previously Republican majority almost evenly between Bush and third-party candidate Ross Perot. That suggests that the libertarian affinity for Republicans is easily broken. Libertarians also gave a high percentage of their votes to third-party candidates in 1980 (independent John B. Anderson and Libertarian Party candidate Ed Clark) and 1996 (again Perot).

But the striking fact in our data analysis is what happened in 2004. The libertarian vote for Bush dropped from 72 to 59 percent, while the libertarian vote for the Democratic nominee almost doubled. It's not hard to imagine why. Bush's record on federal spending, centralization of education, expansion of entitlements, the war in Iraq, executive authority, the federal marriage amendment, and civil liberties was certainly sufficient to dissuade many libertarian voters. Sen. John F. Kerry offered

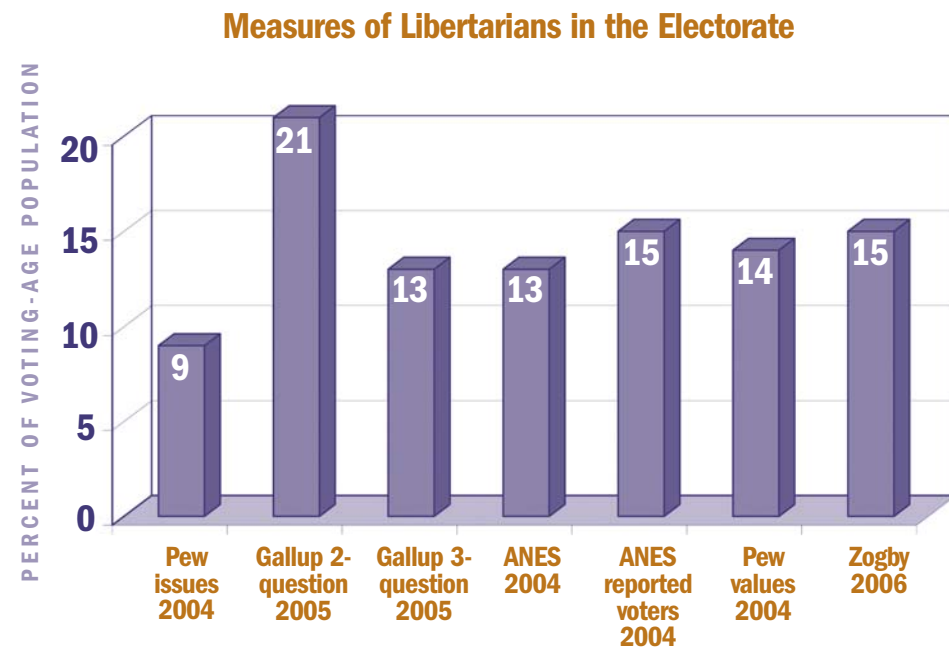
little for libertarians other than “not Bush.” He voted for the war and the Patriot Act, never articulated a clear alternative position on either, and offered standard Democratic support for higher taxes and spending. Nevertheless, he narrowed the Republican majority among libertarians from 52 points to 21 points.

After two more years of war, wiretapping, and welfare-state social spending, we found similar patterns in 2006. In the Zogby survey, 59 percent of libertarians voted for Republican candidates for Congress, and 36 percent voted for Democrats. Comparing those results to the last off-year election in 2002, we find a 24 percentage point swing to the Democrats. That is, libertarians voted for Republican congressional candidates by a margin of 47 percentage points in 2002, and of only 23 points in 2006.

To put this in perspective, front-page stories since the election have reported the dramatic 7-point shift of white conservative evangelicals away from the Republicans. The libertarian vote is about the same size as the religious right vote measured in exit polls, and it is subject to swings more than three times as large.

After the 2000 election Karl Rove was convinced that 4 million Christian evangelicals had stayed home, and he was determined to get them to the polls in 2004. By our calculations, Republicans carried the libertarian vote by 5.5 million votes in the off-year election of 2002 and by only 2.9 million votes in 2006. That’s a swing of 2.6 million libertarian voters. Remember, it takes two new base voters to replace one swing voter who switches from one party to the other. Rove and his colleagues should have been watching out for the libertarian vote as well.

Libertarians who said the war in Iraq was the most important issue voted 64-31 for Democratic congressional candidates. Libertarians who stuck with Republican candidates were most likely to describe terrorism or security as the most impor-



tant issue. Libertarians for whom federal spending was the most important issue were most likely to vote for third-party candidates: 39 percent Democratic, 38 percent Republican, 22 percent other. It’s a sad commentary on today’s Republican Party when its candidates do so poorly among voters concerned about federal spending.

Republicans should be particularly troubled about their standing with young voters, including young libertarian voters. Voters in the 18-34 age groups are more likely than voters over 55 to be libertarian, and the younger libertarians voted more Democratic.

### How Libertarians Voted, 2006

AGE GROUP	DEMOCRATIC	REPUBLICAN	OTHER
18-24	29%	51%	20%
25-34	40%	51%	8%
35-54	27%	67%	6%
55-69	24%	72%	5%
70+	18%	81%	2%

Source: Telephone survey of 1,012 reported voters conducted by Zogby International, Nov. 7-10, 2006. Margin of error +/- 3.1 percent.

### State by State

Congressional elections are held in states and districts. How did the libertarian vote affect specific races? An interesting sidebar to our story is the impact of Libertarian Party candidates, who may have cost Sens. Jim Talent and Conrad Burns their seats, tipping the Senate to Democratic control.

In Montana, the Libertarian candidate got more than 10,000 votes, or 3 percent, while Democrat Jon Tester edged Burns by fewer than 3,000 votes. In Missouri, Claire McCaskill defeated Talent by 41,000 votes, a bit less than the 47,000 Libertarian votes.

This isn’t the first time Republicans have had to worry about losing votes to Libertarian Party candidates. In 1998 incoming Majority Leader Harry Reid was reelected by only 428 votes while the Libertarian candidate pulled in 8,000. In 2000 Maria Cantwell defeated Sen. Slade Gorton (R-WA) by 2,228 votes as the Libertarian took 65,000 votes. And in 2002, in the country’s most hard-fought Senate race, John Thune lost to Sen. Tim Johnson (D-SD) by 524 votes, far less than the 3,000 votes for the Libertarian candidate.

“By 59 to 27 percent, poll respondents said they would describe themselves as ‘fiscally conservative and socially liberal.’”

But a narrow focus on minor party candidates significantly underestimates the role libertarian voters played in 2006. It's libertarian voters who swung Democratic who likely cost Republicans the House and the Senate—dealing blows to Republican candidates in Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Republicans can win the South without libertarians. But this was the year that New Hampshire and the Mountain West turned purple if not blue, and libertarians played a big role there. New Hampshire may be the most libertarian state in the country; its license plates read “Live Free or Die,” and its senators are strong fiscal conservatives who both voted against the Federal Marriage Amendment. But this year both the state's Republican congressmen lost, and both houses of the state legislature went Democratic for the first time since 1874.

Meanwhile, in the Goldwateresque, “leave us alone” Mountain West, Republicans not only lost a Montana Senate seat; they also lost the governorship of Colorado, two House seats in Arizona, and one in Colorado. They had close calls in the Arizona Senate race and House races in Idaho, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, and Dick Cheney's Wyoming. In libertarian Nevada, the Republican candidate for governor won a plurality but not a majority against a Democrat who promised to keep the government out of guns, abortion, and gay marriage. Arizona also became the first state to vote down a state constitutional amendment to define marriage as between one man and one woman.

Aspiring presidential candidates might note that in Iowa libertarians helped vote out Rep. Jim Leach (R), who championed the Internet gambling ban.

If Republicans can't win New Hampshire and the Mountain West, they can't win a national majority. And they can't win those states without libertarian votes. They'll have to stop scaring libertarian,

centrist, and independent voters with big-government social conservatism and become once again the party of fiscal responsibility. In a *Newsweek* poll just before the election, 47 percent of respondents said they trusted the Democrats more on “federal spending and the deficit,” compared to just 31 percent who trusted the Republicans. That's not Ronald Reagan's Republican Party.

### How Libertarians See Themselves

In all of these calculations, we use a broad definition of libertarian. Certainly we are not claiming that 15 percent of American voters have the deep and well-informed commitment to liberty and limited constitutional government of Cato Sponsors or *Reason* magazine readers. Rather, we include both individuals who would self-identify as libertarian and individuals who hold generally libertarian views but may be unfamiliar with the word. It is clear that many people who hold libertarian views don't identify themselves that way. One Rasmussen poll found that only 2 percent of respondents characterized themselves as libertarians, even though 16 percent held libertarian views on a series of questions.

In our Zogby survey we found that only 9 percent of voters with libertarian views identify themselves that way. Voters we identified as libertarian identified themselves this way:

### Ideological Self-Identification of Libertarian Voters

**PROGRESSIVE/VERY LIBERAL – 4%**

**LIBERAL – 6%**

**MODERATE – 31%**

**CONSERVATIVE – 41%**

**VERY CONSERVATIVE – 9%**

**LIBERTARIAN – 9%**

We also asked a new question. We asked half the sample, “Would you describe yourself as fiscally conservative and socially liberal?” We asked the other half of the respondents, “Would you describe yourself as fiscally conservative and socially liberal, also known as libertarian?”

The results surprised us. Fully 59 percent of the respondents said “yes” to the first question. That is, by 59 to 27 percent, poll respondents said they would describe themselves as “fiscally conservative and socially liberal.”

The addition of the word “libertarian” clearly made the question more challenging. What surprised us was how low the drop-off was. A robust 44 percent of respondents answered “yes” to that question, accepting a self-description as “libertarian.”

Surely that question is overinclusive. Still, it's encouraging that 59 percent of Americans think they lean in a libertarian direction on both economic and social issues and that 44 percent are willing to be described as libertarian. And that 59 percent interestingly matches a *Los Angeles Times* poll that found that Americans preferred “smaller government with fewer services” to “larger government with many services” by 59 to 26 percent.

### Conclusion

The era of polarization and base mobilization is officially over. In 2006 voters broke 52-45 for Democrats for the House. This is the largest winning margin of any party since the Republican sweep in 1994.

Polarized elections are fought over turnout. Thus in 2002, 2004, and even 2006, campaign strategists fought over small marginal gains in target demographics. In contrast, the 2008 election will likely be fought more over larger blocs of independent-minded swing voters. By any reasonable estimate, libertarians are a key part of this swing group.

Since we published our initial findings in “The Libertarian Vote,” libertarians are

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## Milton Friedman's Voucher Idea at 50

In a 2005 interview with *Reason* magazine, when asked how he would view his legacy if his idea of universal education vouchers achieved political success, Milton Friedman answered that he would view education reform as his proudest accomplishment. In a new collection of essays from Cato, *Liberty & Learning: Milton Friedman's Voucher Idea at Fifty*, leading education scholars examine the school choice movement and discuss what is keeping it from being Friedman's greatest achievement.

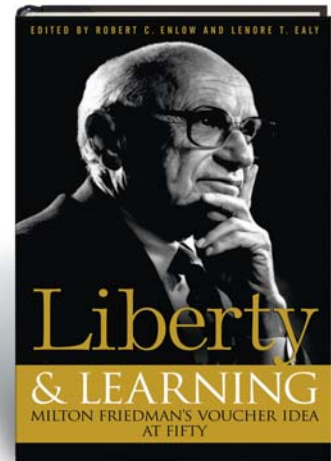
In 1955 Friedman wrote the essay "The Role of Government in Education," in which he said, "It does not make sense for the government to implement universal education through government-run schools." Rather, he said, "government could require a minimum level of schooling financed by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child."

The case for vouchers is in many ways much stronger today than it was in 1955. One of the fiercest criticisms of Friedman's proposal is that vouchers would lead to even further de facto segregation of schools. But Jay Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, argues that experimentation with vouchers suggests that they tend to reduce segregation. On

a similar note, Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at Cato, says that "a half century of accumulated evidence" definitively shows that the private sector can educate students much better than government, but he recommends tax credits rather than vouchers as the best way to give parents and students choice.

“... a half century of accumulated evidence” definitively shows that the private sector can educate students much better than government . . .”

Despite the intellectual victories discussed in these articles, vouchers have made only slight inroads into the public school monopoly. John Coons, Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley, writes that advocates of school choice have relied solely on the rhetoric of liberty to the detriment of the movement's popular appeal. He



explains how supporters can present the idea of vouchers as good for the family.

Other essays in *Liberty & Learning* discuss teachers' unions and the lessons to be learned from private schools in developing countries. In some of his last pieces of published writing, Friedman himself contributes the book's prologue and epilogue. He remains optimistic about the future of school choice. He writes: "Most major public policy revolutions come only after a lengthy buildup of support. But when the break comes, what had been politically impossible quickly becomes politically inevitable."

*Liberty & Learning*, edited by Robert C. Enlow of the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation and Lenore T. Ealy, is available in hardcover for \$19.95 and paperback for \$14.95. Order it at [catostore.org](http://catostore.org).

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being talked about. There seems to be a dawning awareness among pundits, pollsters, and party strategists of the importance of winning libertarian votes.

Libertarian voters have been noticed by writers in *The Economist* and major newspapers. Cato's Brink Lindsey even took to the pages of the *New Republic* to test the waters for a liberal-libertarian alliance, provoking a spirited debate across the political spectrum.

In a revealing exchange, Jon Stewart recently hosted neoconservative Bill Kristol of the *Weekly Standard* on the *Daily Show*, often considered the de facto

television news program for younger viewers. Kristol called Stewart an "Upper West Side liberal." To which Stewart quickly responded, "No, I'm a downtown libertarian."

Libertarian-leaning voters are a larger group than many other much-discussed voter blocs, and they tend to be younger than other voters. More important for political strategists, libertarian voters are "in play." Dissatisfied with big-government policies in both parties, they have shown a willingness to switch their votes from one to the other. The party that can best appeal to libertarian voters may dominate the political future.

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