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2013 American Values Survey: Libertarians

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) released its 2013 American Values Survey report "In Search of Libertarians in America," based on polling that aimed to situate libertarians within the broader political, social and, most importantly for this blog, religious landscape of American life. The report was released at an event at the Brookings Institution.

The first bit of good news is that there are only 7% of the American public who express consistent libertarian views, based on their answers to a set of questions ranging from domestic surveillance, the use of military force abroad, taxes gun control, and the legalization of marijuana, to name a few. Interestingly, in the Q-and-A session, PRRI director Robert Jones said that, unlike white evangelicals, there is no large regional concentration of libertarians, nor a decided split between urban and rural. Also, in the Q-and-A, Brink Lindsey from the Cato Institute acknowledged that "there is no such thing as a libertarian mass movement." He characterized libertarianism as an "elite intellectual movement" but added that there is a libertarian "streak" or "sensibility" that runs more broadly through the population. That seems about right.

In addition to the 7% who voice consistently libertarian views across a range of issues, another 15% qualify for what PRRI terms "lean libertarian," that is, on seven or so of the answers to ten questions, they take the libertarian position but on a couple of issues, they bring other views to bear and reach a different conclusion.

For purposes of analysis, PRRI terms those who consistently do not opt for the libertarian position "communalists." Communalists agree with statements like, "The U.S. has a responsibility to help people

in other countries when they are in crisis,? and ?The best way to promote economic growth in the U.S. is to spend more on education and the nation?s infrastructure, and raise taxes on the wealthy to pay for that spending,? and ?Sometimes government needs to make laws that keep people from harming themselves.?

As you can guess, I would place myself firmly in the communalist camp. And, I am not alone. One of the happier findings of the study is that Catholics are only about 11% of libertarians, but a full 29% of communalists. Go Catholics! By contrast 27% of libertarians come from white mainline Protestant churches, and the same percentage come from those with no religious affiliation.

The religious affiliation and attitudes of libertarians are in stark contrast to the religious affiliation and attitudes of members of the Tea Party. According to PRRI, 19% of libertarians describe themselves as Biblical literalist (and I am dying to encounter their exegesis of Matthew 25!), compared to 32% of Tea Party members and 55% of white evangelicals. 28% of all Americans consider themselves Biblical literalists. 22% of libertarians self-report that they attend religious services at least weekly, compared to 45% for the Tea Party, 60% for white evangelicals, and 31% for all Americans. Perhaps the most interesting finding in the whole poll had to do with those who agree with the statement that it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. 42% of libertarians agreed with that statement, 53% of Tea Party members, and 65% of white evangelicals. 48% of all Americans agreed. Here, the libertarians get it right because, as Pope Francis indicated, even atheists can live moral lives and attain to salvation. Indeed, there is a whiff of heresy about the suggestion that morality and salvation are so intertwined that you cannot have the one without the other.

One religious note where libertarians, Tea Party members and white evangelicals are in agreement is in their prejudices. 29% of libertarians express cool feelings toward Muslims. 27% of Tea Party members and 31% of white evangelicals also share this anti-Muslim bias. Conversely, attitudes about gays and lesbians differ widely among the three groups, with 49% of libertarians expressing warm feelings toward gays and lesbians, compared to only 44% of Tea Party members and 38% of white evangelicals.

If you go to a DC think tank event, and William Galston is on the panel, you can expect him to steal the show. And, he did not disappoint. He noted that what links many liberals and libertarians is their lower levels of religiosity, and what differentiates the two is that liberals tend to be more paternalistic. For example, when asked if the law should make it more difficult to access pornography, only 24% of libertarians agree that law should do so, while 61% of liberals agree. The difference? Libertarians think that the law should keep people from harming others but not interfere when people wish to harm themselves. Liberals are more likely to support efforts to use the law to keep people from harming themselves and also perceive social reality in a less individualistic way, so, on an issue like pornography, the liberal focuses not only on the effect on the person watching it, but also on the industry that produces it, the social consequences of degrading women, etc.

Galston also noted that the survey result indicate that libertarians are actually more open to religion than are liberals. Gauging responses to the statement ?religion causes more problems than it solves,? libertarians broke down 37%-62% while 54% of liberals agreed with that statement compared to only 45% who disagreed. Galston suggested that libertarians perhaps come from religious homes, even if they subsequently have left the practice of religion, while liberals may have never had exposure to religion in the first place. I would also add here that if I understood religion to be what it is portrayed as in popular culture, I probably would not want anything to do with it either. Never forget that the first time the Pew surveys showed an appreciable uptick in the number of people who describe themselves as ?nones? when asked their religious affiliation was in the early 90s, after the Moral Majority had been peddling its brand of religion in the public square for ten years. There is a lesson in that for our Catholic culture warriors too.

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Kudos to PRRI and Brookings for a fascinating survey and discussion. As always, these surveys provoke more questions that we would want to delve into. Someone in the audience asked if the survey had asked respondents if they had served in the military, and alas that is not one of the things included, but it would be fascinating to know if that demographic fact would skew responses on issues such as foreign policy. But, PRRI is not going anywhere and their surveys are helping America's commentariat get deeper into the attitudes that undergird people's politics.

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