

Free Tri-Tip Dinner

Calaveras Politics:

How Many Are There?

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How influential is, for want of a better term, “Tea Party libertarianism” in Calaveras County politics? Today, unlike in the past, no meeting of the Board of Supervisors can be held without a loud dose of strongly libertarian-based challenges to many County policy decisions.

There is some irony here, as many believe that for at least a generation, across a broad spectrum of issues, Calaveras County has been a veritable laboratory of libertarian governance. From its famously laissez-faire land use policies, to its generous (not to say “liberal”) policies regarding the use of marijuana, many believe Calaveras County policy has been strongly influenced by libertarian ideology .

Nevertheless, if a local Rip Van Winkle were to suddenly wake up after 20 years and wander into a Board of Supervisors meeting at just the right moment, he might wonder if he was in the right County. He would hear it said that hundreds, if not thousands, of local citizens are either agents or dupes of a socialist United Nations conspiracy to take away the property rights of county landowners. He would hear some people call the Supervisors communists for voting to become involved in regional negotiations about the future of Calaveras County’s water. He would probably conclude that these weren’t his father’s libertarians.

So naturally, Mr. Winkle might get to wondering whether the people saying these crazy things really represented the people or not. Did a majority of agree with them? From a political standpoint, how important were these people and the organizations they have formed, like the Calaveras Taxpayers Association? Bottom line: just how many of them are there, anyway?

The answer may not be as hard to estimate as it seems.

Politically speaking, as usual, the 2012 Presidential Primary in California was a completely meaningless affair as once again both the Republican and Democratic candidates had already been effectively selected.

But in a strange way, it is that same political meaninglessness that makes the vote more revealing as to voter's real ideological preferences, especially in the Republican Party.

In the case of the Republican candidates, by the California primary they were well known to those citizens of Calaveras County that care to pay attention to such things. Millions had been spent by the campaigns of Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, and Ron Paul, and millions more by God only knows, defining, and re-defining the candidates. A long series of GOP presidential debates created a road-show atmosphere for the primaries as the candidates attacked and defended, and the candidates took positions designed to appeal to likely Republican primary voters. Each of the candidates (with the exception of Ron Paul) took turns leading in the national polls, only to fall back under relentless attack ads from the other Republican candidates. In the end, Mitt Romney's vastly superior resources were effectively brought to bear, the other candidates repeatedly split the anti-Romney vote, allowing Romney to emerge as the winner almost by default.

So when Calaveras Republicans voted in the June Primary, not only did they already know that Romney had clinched the nomination, they had, thanks to the bruising primaries, a real good idea what each of the candidates stood for. And since Romney was already a lock for the nomination, here was a chance (as in 2008) for Republicans to vote their real feelings without worrying about the political considerations of who could best beat Obama. In other words, as in 2008, the Republican primary in California was a kind of spectral analysis of Republican grass-roots ideology.

As we recall, Romney was constantly under attack by the other three GOP candidates for either not being conservative enough or being insincere about his new, more conservative campaign narrative. Romney came to be defined, for better and/or for worse, as different from the other Republican candidates. No matter how hard he tried, Romney never generated the enthusiasm in the Tea Party that Santorum, Gingrich, and Paul did.

Nevertheless, by the California primary, Romney was the presumptive nominee. But, what exactly did he stand for? On most of the issues Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, famously had taken, at one time or another, multiple and disparate positions. Indeed, by California there was only one thing about Romney that GOP voters could say for sure about him: he was NOT Rick Santorum, NOT Newt Gingrich, and NOT Ron Paul. He was not a libertarian theocrat (sorry – but oxymorons are chock-a-block in the fringes of political ideology) like Santorum, not a libertarian visionary illusionary like Gingrich, and he definitely wasn't like the libertarian Ron Paul, the funny little man who wants to surrender to both the terrorists and the Chinese.

No, he was not saying things that were quite as crazy libertarian as the others were, and so the new libertarian Tea Party did not like him. So, leaving Romney's religion out of the equation, for our analysis we conclude that the only rational motivation for any Republican to vote for Mitt Romney in California was to specifically NOT vote for any of the other candidates. In other words, people who voted for Mitt Romney were trying to send a message – just the same as the voters for the other candidates, and that message was, 'Romney may be an empty suit, but those other guys are nuts.'

So in June Republicans in Calaveras County voted, and they voted 79% for Mitt Romney. Romney received nearly 5,000 GOP votes versus around 1,325 GOP votes for Paul, Santorum, and Gingrich combined. That is, by a majority of nearly 3 to 1, Republicans in Calaveras County rejected the kind of extreme libertarianism that is identified with the Tea Party and, to some extent, the Calaveras Taxpayers Association.

But the analysis can't stop there. Added to these 1,325 Republican votes should be the votes of the Libertarian Party (93), and the American Independent Party (332), for their presidential candidates. Doing this yields a total of just around 1,750 2012 primary votes in Calaveras County that can be associated with the new "extreme libertarianism" of the Tea Party.

To put that number in context, we remember that over 3600 Democrats turned out to vote for Obama, and we can safely assume that those voters are not part of the new libertarian Tea Party movement.

So when all the votes for President cast in the 2012 Presidential primary in Calaveras County last June are aggregated, we get some clues about the ideological spectrum in Calaveras:

Far Left and / or Reform-minded:	129	1%
Far Right / Libertarian and / or Religious-minded	1,752	17%
Obama	3,656	35%
Romney	4,957	47%

It is commonly thought that primary elections tend to draw only the most committed and, presumably, ideologically motivated voters. If this is true, then these numbers would tend to overstate the relative strength of both the Far Left and Far Right voters in a Calaveras County general election.

So now Mr. Van Winkle has an answer, sort of. It would seem that Tea Party libertarianism attracts around 1,750, or 17% of County primary voters. On the other hand, 8,600 primary voters (83%), of whom nearly 5000 are Republicans, voted to reject it.

For those that are running for office, there could be lessons in these numbers. Clearly, the rich “mother lode” of votes lies in the mainstream. For a candidate trying to figure out how to build a narrative for their campaign, this analysis would seem to suggest that the ideological extremes might be toxic to building a winning coalition.

Specifically, while the ideological battle lines seem set in Calaveras County’s Supervisorial District Two, in Districts One and Four each challenger is being pressured to provide more policy specifics in their narrative. Although local issues are, so far, dominating the discussion, it will be interesting to see if Tea Party libertarianism exerts an influence on these campaigns beyond what this analysis suggests is warranted.

