Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Four lessons from America's elections [1]

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The results of the US midterms and the stunning success of the Tea Party offer a few lessons to free marketeers and libertarians in the UK. Here are some immediate thoughts:

1) Political earthquakes can happen, and happen quickly. Few in the UK imagine that a Tea Party could emerge here because of differences in temperament and history. I agree. But the Tea Party has shown that a simple, strong message of fiscal responsibility can resonate with individuals outside the political establishment and stir them into action. Frustration with overspending and overtaxation can lead to rapid change in political parties, as the number of Tea Party-backed candidates this cycle demonstrates. We should not rule out the emergence of a bottom-up change to the political landscape in Britain, and the free market message appeals to those dissatisfied with ineffectual and overreaching government.

2) The free market message is the best way for the right to win over new demographic groups. As Republican pundit Patrick Ruffini pointed out [3], the supposedly-racist Tea Party supported black, hispanic and other minority candidates to victory ? Marco Rubio, Tim Scott and Nikki Haley are three notable examples. Rubio and Haley are both the children of immigrants and strongly pro-market. If the right in Britain hopes to adapt to a changing population, it should learn from America that the small state, pro-market approach can appeal to people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

3) Libertarianism is becoming increasingly electable. The election of Rand Paul, son of Ron, is heartening. Paul, though backed by Sarah Palin and the Tea Party, is openly libertarian on most issues ? sometimes embarrassingly so [4] ? and has the potential to be an independent-minded voice for individual liberty in the Senate. Paul?s landslide election shows that, if libertarians can co-opt party apparatus to win a nomination, their views are often surprisingly appealing to the electorate. Kentucky is a far cry from the Home Counties, but his anti-bailout, anti-corporatist platform could be just as effective in some parts of Britain. On the other hand, the Californian ballot initiative to legalize marijuana failed ? the libertarian message still has a long way to go.

4) Social conservatism is becoming decreasingly electable. The Tea Party-backed candidates who struggled and often failed were the ones like Christine O?Donnell, Sharron Angle and Ken Buck who emphasized a socially conservative message that strayed from the free market principles that are at the

core of the Tea Party. Angle said that she wanted to ban alcohol [5], while O?Donnell?s campaign was a trainwreck from its conception thanks in part to her outspoken opposition to masturbation [6]. Voters simply don?t want to hear a politician trying to control their bedrooms while claiming to free their wallets.

Britain isn?t America, and it would be a mistake to read too much into these results. Still, they offer an impressive example of how free marketeers can return from the wilderness and decisively shape an election.

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