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# Opinion

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**Libertarian FIREBRAND**

## U.S. Rep. Justin Amash, a Ron Paul protégé, seeks a GOP 'revolution'

BY MARISA SCHULTZ

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As a young Michigan state representative with a penchant for casting the sole "no" vote on legislation in Lansing, Justin Amash wondered how his independent streak would fare in Congress.

So Amash flew to Texas in early 2010 to ask advice from someone with a history of bucking the establishment in Washington: U.S. Rep. Ron Paul.

Paul explained to Amash that voting against the Republican Party in Congress may be a difficult path, but he encouraged Amash, saying sticking to the limits of the Constitution and fighting for civil liberties wins support among constituents. "Liberty is popular," Paul said, according to Amash.

Since Amash, 31, was elected to Congress that same year he's managed to carry out Paul's advice, as the two congressmen are among those who most frequently vote against the GOP leadership in their steadfast following of the Constitution. OpenCongress.org said the two — and North Carolina Rep. Walter Jones — most often buck their party.

Though Amash doesn't agree with Paul on everything, including nuances on foreign policy, tax breaks and earmarks, their political philosophies have been in step, albeit in the minority in Congress. OpenCongress.org said Amash and Paul cast similar votes 86 percent of the time.

"I think he was well on his way," Paul said of his Texas meeting with Amash. "It wasn't like I invented Justin Amash. Justin just needed a little confidence building."

What began as a meeting in Texas between political mentor and protégé has evolved into a relationship that's taken on greater importance as Paul, 76, prepares to leave Congress at the end of his 12th term in January 2013. Amash of Cascade Township near Grand Rapids says he's ready to take up the torch in the House and believes the movement Paul has started and grown during three runs for president means it won't be long before he's not so alone.

Paul has been the "godfather of the liberty movement" within the Republican Party, Amash said. While "no one can replace Ron Paul," Amash says he will do what he can in the House — along with Paul's son, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, and Sen. Mike Lee of Utah — to advance the principles of strict constitutional governance, smaller government, non-interventionist foreign policy, transparency and civil liberties.

"We will do our best to carry the liberty movement forward," Amash said.

Greg McNeilly, a GOP strategist who works out of Grand Rapids, said Amash is being authentic to who he is as a person and it's up to voters in his West Michigan district to decide this year, since he's up for re-election, whether that's good or bad.

"He does appear to be the heir apparent to Congressman Paul in terms of carrying on the ideological mantle and consistency," McNeilly said. "I think it's Ron Paul 2.0."

Bill Ballenger, editor of Inside Michigan Politics, said Amash draws much of his support from the tea party, which aligns with Libertarians on economic issues but also has many members who disagree with Paul's party on social issues like gay marriage.

Paul doesn't view himself as an individual passing the torch, but rather as a spokesman for the many before him who believe in free market economics. While there are some in the House, including liberal Democrats, who align with him on wars and civil liberties, Amash, he says, "understands it completely."

Paul said that while others have sought his support in the past, Amash's sincerity and voting record stood out.

Others "want to get the support of people who understand what I'm doing, but they don't necessarily have their heart in it," said Paul, who endorsed Amash in his first bid for Congress. "Justin was different."

Paul has campaigned on ending wars, cutting \$1 trillion in spending in his first year, eliminating government departments, ending the Federal Reserve, restoring civil liberties and for the United States to stop policing the world.

John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the CATO Institute, said Amash "presents the (libertarian) philosophy well."

There have been some converts in Congress to his way of thinking, largely because of public pressure, Paul says, but he believes it will be more outsiders like Amash who will help change the tide.

"A revolution is going on," Paul said in Michigan.

"It's really going to change the way the Republican Party operates over the next several decades," Amash said. "People like Ron Paul, Rand Paul, Mike Lee and myself are just the beginning of a very big movement here. ..." In a decade or more, Amash believes "a majority or a large minority of the Republican Party will hold the same views."

Said Paul: "He may well be right. Let's hope so."

Amash first met Paul in 2007 at the Republican Leadership Conference on Mackinac Island and supported Paul in the GOP primary in 2008. He even planted a Paul campaign sign in his lawn. This time around, Amash is one of only a few House Republicans who has endorsed Paul.

At one of Paul's GOP presidential primary campaign stops in February at Central Michigan University, Amash introduced his political mentor for the first time to a largely young crowd, calling him an inspiration and someone he admires.

"I've had the honor of introducing many people during my time in public office," Amash said, "but no one who I admire nearly as much as Dr. Ron Paul."

"We need to bring the liberty movement into the Republican Party. We are really changing the fabric of the Republican Party, so keep doing what you are doing," Amash told the crowd.

"We are going to change this party, we're going to change this country, and we're going to restore the republic."

## **Facebook politics**

For his part, Amash is trying to convey the message of limited government to a wider audience by using social media. He's the only congressman to post an explanation of every vote on his Facebook page, with a Feb. 15 vote on naming a New York post office marking his 1,000th straight vote explanation posting.

Sometimes, explanations are needed, he says, like why the libertarian-leaning Amash was the sole "no" Republican vote on a Nov. 1 resolution affirming "In God We Trust" as the country's motto and encouraging its public display on public buildings. "The faith that inspired many of the Founders of this country — the faith I practice — is stronger than that," Amash wrote on his Facebook page. "Trying to score political points with unnecessary resolutions should not be Congress's priority."

McNeilly says Amash's communication skills give him a leg up on Paul.

"I think Justin is a more effective communicator, not just because of his tactic of using Facebook," he said. "He's a more fluid communicator. Part of that is by training. He went to law school and Dr. Paul went to medical school."

Amash, who won his seat in Congress by defeating Democrat Pat Miles by a nearly 2-1 margin, will face the winner of August's Democratic primary between Steve Pestke and Trevor Thomas in a district that is a bit more Democratic after redistricting.

Ballenger said he thinks Amash is too conservative on many issues even for his own Michigan district, one of the most right-wing in the state. For that reason, moderate Democratic Pestke could end up drawing independents and even some moderate Republicans away from Amash in November, he said.

Steve Mitchell, chairman of Mitchell Research & Communications in Lansing, said Amash has always "marched to the beat of his own drummer." But, that could have its drawbacks.

"You're standing on principle. But when you're out of step with the delegation, you limit your ability to accomplish much for your district and you marginalize yourself within the Republican caucus and with fellow Republicans."

## **Working together**

Amash has found an ally in Paul on legislation. Of the six resolutions Amash has sponsored, Paul has signed on to half of them, including a bill last year to cease military operations in Libya unless Congress authorizes such use of force and another bill to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Both bills had Democratic support, but failed to go anywhere in Congress.

Of the 48 bills Paul sponsored this session, most do not have fellow sponsors. Amash signed on to his legislation to audit the Federal Reserve system and another to repeal a controversial section of the National Defense Authorization Act that permits military detentions of some terrorist suspects in the United States.

Still, there's about 10 percent of things the two congressmen don't see eye to eye on, Amash says, though Paul sees them as nuances. One example is the strategy in killing Osama bin Laden. Paul would have preferred another channel such as the trial and hanging of Iraq's Saddam Hussein than a covert invasion of Pakistan, whereas Amash is comfortable with the tactic used to kill the al-Qaida leader. Amash is against targeted tax breaks, whereas Paul wants tax breaks for all and believes a tax credit for certain programs along the way is a step toward that goal.

And Paul supports the principle of congressional earmarks, believing all spending is essentially an earmark and without it the spending power would be transferred to the president. However, Amash argues earmarks lead to larger appropriations bills.

Paul believes Amash just needed some initial encouragement. "I don't think he needs it so much any more," Paul said. "I think his feet are firmly planted. I don't think he needs me to guide him anymore."

Paul doesn't view Amash as a protégé, rather as a friend. Their staffs communicate frequently, Paul said, and if he's gone from Congress, he'll seek out Amash to discuss finer points on issues.

"I trust him," Paul said. "I'll take advice from him now."