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## The New Goldwater?

**As the GOP presidential field churns, Ron Paul remains Ron Paul.**

[Brian Doherty](#) | May 19, 2011

The Republican presidential field is shifting, with one (reasonably) expected frontrunner, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, and one (unreasonably hyped) frontrunner, reality TV star [Donald Trump](#), both dropping out of the prospective race to bash their heads against President Barack Obama in 2012.

Meanwhile, Newt Gingrich—coming in at [number three](#) in a recent Gallup poll, though largely on name recognition—has managed to [start and flameout spectacularly](#) in one week. [Said flameout](#) doesn't mean that the former chief of the Republicans' grand 1994 moment of triumph won't have juice when the votes actually get cast—though we still must presume he can fund a realistic campaign machine between now and then.

The fundraising record of what *The Wall Street Journal* calls "[Newt Inc.](#)"—a set of political advocacy and consulting organizations Gingrich runs—"has amassed more than 1.7 million voter and donor contacts and raised \$32 million between 2009 and 2010." As the *Journal* notes, that makes a Gingrich machine "seem quite possible." At least it did a week ago. *Huffington Post* is now reporting that [significant GOP players and financiers](#) are abandoning Newt like he's an ill first wife.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, despite his vulnerability on the GOP-important issue

of bashing ObamaCare, is fundraising and polling like he's *the* frontrunner, in the grand GOP tradition of “it seems to be his turn.” Frontrunners from the last election Hillary Clinton and Rudy Giuliani should be consulted on whether long-term moving plans are prudent based on media-anointed frontrunner status this many months before voting starts.

And while media-driven candidates such as Jon Huntsman (former ambassador to China and governor of Utah) are still bubbling up (and I'm not sure why even those poor bored bastards in the election horserace press who have to gin up something new to be excited about daily care about this fanless unknown), Republicans are said to be dreaming of someone, anyone else.

Yet an objectively real, experienced, close-second-tier candidate like Texas Republican Rep. Ron Paul (campaigning in Nevada this week) is getting less attention from the media and party bigwigs than almost any of the above. And this is despite strong showings in various polls (including being the closest of any of the GOP field to beating Obama), and name recognition above 50 percent this early, even while lots of the media still flat-out pretends that he doesn't exist. That disrespect for candidate Paul is hard to explain given that he has the most consistent set of beliefs and policies that actually could turn America in the direction ostensibly desired by Republican Party voters: smaller government, less spending, less taxes.

Even writers who seem to be crying out for a candidate who is Ron Paul in nearly every important belief manage to not endorse the actual Ron Paul. While Romney pretends you can right America's debt problems without hitting the military, Paul understands why that is ridiculous. While both Romney and Gingrich are vulnerable on ObamaCare, Paul says, “As President, not only would I issue waivers from 'Obamacare' for all states, but I would issue mandate waivers for all individuals by instructing the IRS not to assess the penalties for non-compliance with the mandate law.”

Still, Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels is treated as the serious small-government candidate. Daniels may like libertarian books, but he isn't too solid on libertarian principles about the proper limits of government power on issues such as the drug war. And the Cato Institute, in its grading of the governors' tax and spend policies, has never given Daniels better than a B, and once gave him a D.

What candidate Daniels does have for the politicos to swoon over is that he is an experienced policy designer, and undoubtedly has more sophisticated-seeming and detailed answers to policy problems than any of the other candidates. Ron Paul, in contrast, is no wonk, no crafter of elaborate policy solutions. He's more likely to undercut the assumptions underlying the idea that there should even *be* a government policy to address any perceived problem. While critiquing Rep. Paul Ryan's (R-Wisc.) popular budget plan for not going far enough, Paul told me last month he doesn't anticipate issuing his own detailed budget plan. He wants to stress the big

picture of what government should or should not be doing. Paul thinks that only a radical readjustment of government's mission back to its original constitutional limits can halt the damaging cycle of debt and currency inflation.

Paul has perception problems, to be sure, even beyond the received wisdom that of course he can't win the nomination. Certain loudmouth traditionalist right-wing voices can't stand his bold defense of drug freedom as analogous to religious freedom; certain loudmouth traditionalist voices on the progressive left can't stand how much more progressive this libertarian constitutionalist can sound than they ever do. Paul loudly supports such hippie (or crunchy conservative—remember them?) causes as raw milk legalization, and while remaining the most radical voice for budget cuts he will still tell MSNBC that going after aid to the poor shouldn't be the budget cutter's highest priority.

Does this mean Paul is a hopeless cause? A candidate widely reviled as insanely extreme in the cause of shrinking government has risen to lead the Republican Party before—remember Barry Goldwater? Goldwater's progress from 1960 to 1964, when he won the nomination, lost the election, and still defined the shape of his party for decades down the line, should deliver both hope and despair to Ron Paul's fan.

Reading about Goldwater's status and fans during that era brings to mind Paul's situation far more than it does that of any other candidate today. Life magazine wrote in 1963 of "Goldwater zealots" who "lauded their man as Meccans must have lauded Mohammed," emulating many comments I've heard about the near-religious dedication of Paul's fans. And the position of the Goldwater movement before he won the nomination in the minds of the "serious" was no stronger than Ron Paul's is now. As political scientist Matthew Dallek rightly summed up in a review of Mary C. Brennan's 1995 book *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP*:

In the late 1950s and early 1960s conservatives were widely dismissed as "kooks" and "crackpots" with no hope of winning political power.

Journalists were equally contemptuous. In 1962 a writer in the *The Nation* suggested that conservatives were more interested in thinking up "frivolous and simple-minded" slogans than in developing intelligent proposals to meet the complexities of post-Second World War America. *The Washington Post* described members of one conservative group as people who liked to "complain about the twentieth century."...

Expressing the sense of rebellion that Goldwater's book helped inspire, one student conservative explained the phenomenon: "You walk around with your Goldwater button, and you feel that thrill of treason."

One might as well be reading about Ron Paul. In the introduction to his #1 bestseller *The Revolution*, Paul wrote, “Truth is treason in the empire of lies.” That sense of fighting the power absolutely energizes many of Paul’s young fans. As with Paul, Goldwater’s most noticeable and fanatical supporters represented a fresh wave of youthful energy in the party. And that youthful energy is something unique to Paul among Republicans today.

The similarities between them by no means guarantees a Paul victory, however. Goldwater had many advantages Paul does not. Goldwater’s bellicose anticommunism matched that of his natural mass constituency far better than does Paul’s nuanced, sympathetic understanding of the grievances of people in the Middle East. Goldwater also had the advantage of being the first national candidate to win the love of a burgeoning elite with money, the southern and Sunbelt interests that were then matching and later supplanting the old Eastern Establishment as guardians of American wealth and clout. Paul is so far a purely populist phenomenon, loved and supported by many, many Americans but representing no particular class or power elite interest. Paul’s resolute grounding in his longstanding beliefs, refusing to back down on even his most controversial stances on things like drugs and the jingoistic projecting of U.S. power, will continue to win him loyal fans. But it’s unlikely to win him a powerful cabal with concentrated money and influence that’s willing to try to make him president.

Paul is less of a party man than Goldwater was. Despite feeling aggrieved, Goldwater campaigned heartily for Nixon in 1960. It’s hard to imagine Paul being anything but contemptuous of any other possible Republican candidate but Gary Johnson. Goldwater folk had footholds and recognition in the GOP establishment, including both politics and the media, something that Paul and his folk lack today. If the modern Republican powers-that-be have any historical sense about Paul at all, they clearly see him as more of a return of the John Birch Society than a return of Barry Goldwater. But Americans in 2011 seem far more willing, according to our recent Reason/Rupe poll, to cheer rather than jeer Paul’s lack of party discipline.

Clearly many Republicans fear that presidential candidate Ron Paul would be less Goldwater in ‘64 than McGovern in ‘72—a candidate whose radicalism might appeal to a dominant segment of his own party, but which would also disastrously mar his party’s reputation among the nation at large and cause him to lose roundly to an incumbent president.

But if the voters and thought leaders of the Republican Party can’t at least honestly debate Paul’s uncompromising ideas about how to turn around a ship of state that is battered, top-heavy, taking on water, and sinking fast, well, the party might still be able to fake relevance for one more pathetic election cycle. But it will have abandoned any pretence of relevance when it comes to actually solving our impossible-to-ignore problems of fiscal, monetary, and foreign policy overreach in a manner consistent with the party’s own alleged principles.

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