

Mitt Romney Vs. Rand Paul In 2016?

- BY LIZ HALLORAN
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As sort-of-still-a-presidential-candidate Ron Paul continues to collect delegates at state Republican Party conventions, the question of what the libertarian Texas congressman wants has become more urgent in GOP circles.

A speaking role at the Republican convention, where Mitt Romney is expected to accept the nomination?

A seat at the party's rule-making table to advocate making it easier for non-mainstream candidates to compete in future GOP nominating contests?

Well, yes, as a start.

But it's increasingly looking like Paul, 76, and his passionate loyalists are consolidating clout in state party organizations with an eye toward 2016. They appear to be laying the groundwork for a future presidential run by the congressman's son, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky.

A run even — and, perhaps, especially — if Romney is the incumbent president. It's a scenario that the younger Paul, 49, a Tea Party favorite, has not tamped down.

"Sounds like a good question to have no comment on for me," he said, grinning, at a recent Cato Institute forum, when asked directly by the moderator about whether he'd challenge a potential President Romney four years from now.

Son Of Liberty

The younger Paul, like his dad, has shown no hesitation in taking on the powerful in his own party. He did it to win his Senate seat, and he's doing it Tuesday in the GOP primary in Kentucky.

The presidential part of the state's primary, in which 42 of Kentucky's 45 GOP convention delegates are at stake, may be a done-deal yawner between Romney, the elder Paul and former candidates still on the ballot.

But Paul the younger has stirred things up in a hotly contested open congressional seat by backing, with the Tea Party and the free-marketers at Club for Growth, a candidate who is taking on the establishment party pick.

Sound familiar?

David Boaz, executive vice president at Cato, the libertarian think tank, views his home state of Kentucky as an unlikely launching pad for a candidate like Rand Paul.

"My home state is not all that libertarian," Boaz says.

Yet Rand Paul won an open Senate seat there in 2010 by smiting in a primary the GOP candidate preferred by party power brokers, including Kentucky's senior senator, Mitch McConnell, and then defeating the Democratic state attorney general in the fall election.

"Rand Paul has softer edges than his dad," Boaz says. "That helped him get elected to the Senate."

For Boaz, author of *Libertarianism: A Primer*, those softer edges exhibit themselves like this: "Rand Paul talks about reforming the Federal Reserve, not ending it. He talks about extricating the country from the war, but is not as dogmatically noninterventionist as Ron Paul. And he talks less about Austrian economics and more about the budget."

But make no mistake, Rand Paul's brief electoral record and his emerging on-the-stump persona show that he is more like his father, who ran for president on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1988, than those selling the softer side of Rand Paul might want to acknowledge.

Efforts to modulate the Paul family's political and public personality have also been undertaken in Ron Paul's delegate-gathering campaign. Recently, his campaign staff called for Paul supporters and delegates to act civilly and with decorum, drawing no negative attention to the movement.

Libertarians, after all, view what's happening in the Republican Party as a battle for the soul of the party, a battle that may in four years pit Rand Paul against Mitt Romney.

"Since the Republican Party is the vehicle through which this action is happening now, it's probably better if Romney wins [this year] and is as bad as the libertarians expect him to be," Brian Doherty, senior editor of the libertarian *Reason* magazine, said recently at a Cato event to promote his book, *Ron Paul's rEVOLution*.

That scenario, Doherty argued, would allow a "convincing primary challenger to make very real to the party that there are two wings to the party fighting for supremacy — the Romney wing vs. the Paul wing."

Asked whether the senator wanted to elaborate on Doherty's scenario, Paul's spokesperson, Moira Bagley, emailed this statement: "Sen. Paul has continually said he will support the GOP nominee for president."

If Obama is re-elected, the expected GOP nomination free-for-all in 2016 — those in the wings include New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal — would greatly dilute Rand Paul's ability to take that battle to the party.

Ready For A Libertarian?

Much has been made of new polls that show Americans are increasingly more tolerant of same-sex marriage and less supportive of restrictions on gun ownership.

But those who have seized on the new data as proof that the country is embracing libertarian values, including those of less government intrusion in peoples' private lives, as well as in the business world, may be overstating their case.

"The dynamics of those two issues are very, very different," says Carroll Doherty of the Pew Research Center.

The change in attitude toward same-sex marriage is "a wave among younger people," he said. "The big shift in gun control attitudes has been since Obama's election, and among whites, and especially men." A [Gallup survey in 2011](#) showed that support for gun control measures had fallen to historic lows.

"You have to be very careful about talking about a real libertarian trend on issues," he said. "It's a sentiment that's been out there, but I wouldn't necessarily call it growing."

Pew polling in May 2011 suggests that about 10 percent of registered voters nationally [describe themselves as libertarians](#). They are predominantly Republican, white and male, and are strong economic conservatives and "relatively liberal" on social issues.

They are less religious than any other Republican group, Doherty says, adding that, in fact, they are less religious than the general public. Fifty-three percent of those polled who identified their views as libertarian said religion is an important part of their lives, compared with 71 percent of the overall population.

Though many Americans don't understand the term "libertarian," Doherty says, Pew identified key beliefs including being "highly critical of government, not very supportive of the social safety net, and taking a more liberal view on social issues."

"What's interesting is because of the partisan structure, it's still hard for libertarians to find a comfortable place in either party," he says, making it difficult to say whether there's a natural constituency nationally for a candidate like Rand Paul.

Libertarians like Boaz argue that their analysis of national polls, and a focus on two or three salient questions about the size and power of government, suggests that up to 15 percent of Americans fit the description of a libertarian.

"There are plenty of libertarians," he says. "It's a significant bloc potentially available to a candidate who is fiscally conservative and socially liberal."

Libertarianism With A Capital 'L'

Theodora "Tonie" Nathan ran for vice president of the United States on the 1972 Libertarian Party ticket.

Now, 89, Nathan, who lives in Oregon, regrets the decline of the party, especially in her state, but sees opportunity working under the Republican banner and opportunity for Rand Paul.

"I think he can influence more people that way, change their attitudes," Nathan said in a telephone interview this week. "The more voices we have to talk about personal liberty and less government, the better off the nation is."

The chorus of voices, whatever its size, seemed destined to be led by one Paul or another for the foreseeable future.

Oh, and one other point the author Brian Doherty wanted to make during that recent appearance at Cato: Ron Paul has a "base that's willing to give — and that's very important in politics."

Just ask Mitt Romney, who has raised \$97.9 million as of April 30. Ron Paul raised \$38.7 million, more than any other GOP presidential challenger.

Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson? He reported collecting \$807,273.