

Ron Paul and the tea party playbook

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The Republican National Convention this week announced speaking slots for libertarian Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and social conservative Rick Santorum. Both claim the “tea party” brand. However the 2012 primary season reveals that the tea party playbook is more Paul than Santorum.

Conventional political wisdom for at least two decades has held that Republican primaries are won by emphasizing values issues to placate socially conservative voters. Observers point to Santorum’s strong showing in the presidential primaries. Exit polls, however, reveal Santorum never won a majority of the tea party vote in any primary.

Republican candidates must increasingly win over both Paul and tea party supporters on economic issues. Libertarians and the tea party movement are intertwined in ways the campaigns and the media have yet to fully appreciate.

Tea party supporters are actually united on economics, but split on social issues, we find, compiling data from local and national polls with dozens of original interviews with tea party members and leaders. Roughly half the tea party is socially conservative, half libertarian: fiscally conservative, but socially moderate to liberal.

Libertarians led the way for tea party disaffection with establishment Republicans. Starting in early 2008 through the early tea parties, libertarians were more than twice as “angry” with the Republican Party as social conservatives; more pessimistic about the economy and deficit during the Bush years, and more frustrated that people like them cannot affect government. Libertarians, including young people who supported Paul’s 2008 presidential campaign, provided much of the early energy for the tea party and spread the word through social media.

In fact, 91 percent of tea party libertarians are more concerned about taxes and jobs than gay marriage and abortion, according to a New York Times poll. Religious bona fides will not win the tea party vote in primaries. The tea party’s strong libertarian roots help explain why more and more Republican candidates are running as functional libertarians—emphasizing fiscal issues such as spending, tax reform and ending bailouts, while avoiding subjects like abortion and gay marriage—and winning.

- In Indiana’s Senate primary, tea party-backed Richard Mourdock ran a functionally libertarian campaign and won against Sen. Richard Lugar, a fiscal

moderate and 36-year incumbent. Mourdock railed against government spending and promised to cut federal agencies, but hasn't talked about gay marriage.

- In a Kentucky congressional primary, tea party candidate Thomas Massie won against Alecia Webb-Edgington. Massie opposed the PATRIOT Act, the drug war, and military adventurism. Webb-Edgington, by contrast, argued, "We don't need any more socialists, communists or libertarians in the Republican Party."
- In Florida's Senate primary, Rep. Connie Mack won the backing of the tea party over fiscal moderate Sen. George LeMieux and big-government social conservative Rep. Dave Weldon. Mack voted twice against the Wall Street bailout in 2008, and his "Penny Plan" to cut spending was incorporated as part of the "Tea Party Budget." Weldon failed to gain momentum among tea partiers, despite hiring Santorum's communications director and winning the support of evangelical leaders.
- In Wisconsin's Senate primary, tea party voters have pushed businessman Eric Hovde to a polling lead over Mark Neumann. Neumann told the New York Times that he would refuse to hire a gay staffer, and in a speech before the Christian Coalition said, "If I was elected God for a day, homosexuality wouldn't be permitted." Hovde has emphasized his strong stand for cutting spending and limiting government.
- There are exceptions to this trend. In Tuesday's Missouri Senate primary, John Brunner led in the polls against socially conservative Rep. Todd Akin. Brunner highlighted his studies at the Foundation for Economic Education, one of the oldest U.S. libertarian organizations. However, Sarah Palin's late endorsement of Sarah Steelman split enough tea party supporters to hand Akin a victory.

Left-leaning pundits are anxious to dismiss the tea party as the same old religious right. But the evidence shows they are wrong. Functionally libertarian candidates who focus on fiscal, not social, issues increasingly unite the tea party in primaries and then win general election voters concerned about the economy.

The tea party playbook is more Paul than Santorum: Libertarianism is becoming a winning strategy for candidates of a major party.

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