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Ron Paul: Libertarian Standard-Bearer?

Is presidential candidate Ron Paul a libertarian standard-bearer?

By: Elizabeth Williamson

Through multiple presidential runs and 12 terms in Congress, the Texas Republican has emerged as one of the nation's best-known small-government champions. That means no to income taxes and the Federal Reserve and, ultimately anyway, a return to gold as a basis for the nation's currency. The former obstetrician believes personal liberty trumps federal laws governing abortion, smoking, narcotics, and seat belts. And today's [Wall Street Journal](#) offers more about how Mr. Paul's non-interventionist foreign policy has proven both blessing and curse.

The candidate polls only about 10% nationally, but his backers are fiercely loyal.

"His influence is far larger than the votes that he gets," says Nick Gillespie, the editor of Reason.com, the online edition of libertarian Reason magazine. "No politician has been more important in mainstreaming the libertarian idea that individuals should have more power and the government should have less," says Mr. Gillespie, author with Reason magazine editor Matt Welch, of "The Declaration of Independents: How Libertarian Politics Can Fix What's Wrong with America."

Mr. Paul has gained surprising traction this year among people battered by war and recession, who have experienced a historic loss of faith in government. As the compromises involved in governing expose the limits of the tea party movement he fostered, Mr. Paul, often to his own detriment, remains ideologically pure.

“Prohibiting individuals to practice anything, even though you might not like it, is not a good idea. But that doesn’t mean I endorse it,” Mr. Paul says.

Mr. Paul is focused on New Hampshire, Iowa and Nevada, early contests with cheaper media markets and plenty of Paul acolytes. In 2008, rowdy, jeering Paul supporters co-opted the Nevada Republican Convention for a time, setting themselves up to claim nearly all the state’s 31 delegates to the national convention.

The counter-culture fringe is still there: They gathered under a tent during a downpour in rural Derry, N.H., last month for a “house party” that included plans for a skydiving team to jump with homemade “Ron Paul” banners streaming from their parachutes. But the candidate’s trips to a big insurance firm and a senior center drew the demographic groups the GOP covets: members of the military, state GOP legislators, disillusioned Obama voters, and the elderly, concerned about leaving a legacy of government debt.

“I’m very impressed by him. He doesn’t have any power behind him, but he’s straightforward,” said Dave Hale, a resident of Concord’s Heritage Heights Senior Community in Concord.

David Boaz of the libertarian Cato Institute calls Mr. Paul an “imperfect messenger,” supported by only about half of the consistent U.S. libertarians identified in a recent Cato study. Take Mr. Paul’s views on trade: he supports “free trade,” but didn’t vote for the South Korea, Colombia and Panama agreements passed by the House this week, having called such deals “managed trade.”

“A nice idea in theory, but you can’t let purism get in the way of legitimately freeing trade,” says Mr. Boaz.

Yet, he says, “on the big issues—small government, less government spending, sound money and a non-interventionist foreign policy, he’s a good standard-bearer.”

If there were no Ron Paul, his supporters say, it would be necessary to invent one. And that may soon be necessary, because this race marks the end of Mr. Paul’s time in Congress, and perhaps, at age 76, his last presidential run as well.

“The ultimate end game is to see Rand Paul run in 2016,” says Reason’s Mr. Welch, referring to Mr. Paul’s son, elected to the Senate from Kentucky in 2010. “Rand won’t probably ever inspire the intense devotion and loyalty that Ron Paul does, but people like him, and he has won a general election.”

Mr. Paul, meanwhile, says political “pragmatism” is unacceptable, embraced only by “utilitarians” who’ve fallen prey to the mainstream GOP’s “careless thinking.” He rejects the idea that he’s got a slim-to-none chance of winning, but readily acknowledges that even if he did, he’d never be able to pare government to fit his principles.

But at least, he says, “Nobody charges me with flip-flopping.”