

## Paul Ryan and the libertarians: It's complicated

Chris Moody, August 30, 2012

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TAMPA—Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan may not be a libertarian, but he is one of the few high-profile members of Congress who spend a lot of time hanging out with them.

For years, Ryan has taken deliberate steps to nurture relationships with the libertarian intelligentsia in Washington, D.C., making himself available to the movement's broad network of think tanks and advocacy groups. [Ryan has held Capitol Hill briefings with economists from the libertarian Cato Institute\\*](#), and he recently delivered the keynote address at an annual gala for the free-market [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#). Ryan even spoke at the Atlas Institute in 2005, where he notoriously discussed the influential role of objectivist philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand on his own life. He pays homage to economists like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, making their books "required reading" for members of his staff. "The reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand," Ryan said at the time.

"He's surely got the most libertarian friends of anyone on a national ticket since Jack Kemp," said Cato Executive Vice President David Boaz. "And he can definitely talk the language of free markets and individual rights." He doesn't always use those skills, but Ryan is indeed a fluent speaker of libertarianese. If you listened carefully to his speech at the Republican National Convention on Wednesday, the libertarian language was clear, particularly when he decried "the supervision and sanctimony of the central planners." Call it a dog whistle for anyone who's ever read "Atlas Shrugged."

"I can't think of any VP candidate that has been this friendly toward a free-market perspective on government," said Yaron Brook, executive director of the Ayn Rand Institute.

But despite his rhetoric and networking, the major policy initiatives that Ryan has supported often sound more like they came from a Heritage Foundation briefing paper than the brain of a Cato analyst.

"Paul Ryan is a rare bird among the dodos who manage to dominate politics. He's interested in conversation and discussion," said Nick Gillespie, co-author of ["The Declaration of Independents: How Libertarian Politics Can Fix What's Wrong With America."](#) "But in the end, what we need are legislators who are good at their jobs, not good guys."

At the libertarian Reason magazine, it wasn't long after Romney chose Ryan as his running mate that the magazine's writers embarked on an effort to distance the candidate from the movement. Headlines like "[Paul Ryan Is a Big Government Conservative](#)," "[Vice President Paul Ryan Would Not Be Vice President Ayn Rand](#)," and "[Don't Believe the Hype About Paul Ryan](#)" blared across the magazine's website.

"Libertarians," wrote [Jesse Walker](#), a reporter for Reason, "should find it easy to reject Ryan. He's a [hawk](#) with a [rotten record](#) on civil liberties: bad on the Patriot Act, bad on indefinite detentions, bad on surveillance, bad on the border fence, bad on the drug war. On the economic front, he has backed the bank and auto bailouts, Medicare Part D, even [Davis-Bacon](#). His reputation as a free-market stalwart rests on his [exaggerated reputation](#) as a budget hawk and his habit of [praising Ayn Rand](#)."

But for a movement whose members sometimes feel sidelined or ignored by the major parties, others say that even a token olive branch goes a long way. They point to Ryan's controversial work as House Budget Committee chairman as a promising start to making the national conversation about out-of-control spending and limiting the scope of government.

"The first indication of friendship is they actually speak to each other, so I think he's indicated the value of libertarian thinking," said Fred Smith, the founder of the Competitive Enterprise Institute. "Of course, looking to politicians for heroes is looking for love in all the wrong places."

Among Ron Paul libertarians, a group that values purity over pragmatism, some can find positive things to say about the candidate who joined the ticket that ultimately defeated their hero. At a rally the day before the Republican National Convention in Tampa, thousands of Paul supporters gathered at the University of South Florida Sun Dome for a final farewell to the retiring Texas congressman, and reactions to Ryan were mixed.

"You've got to be realistic and a lot of libertarians are not realistic. His budget plan features huge deficits for years into the future," said Timothy Condon, a New Hampshire attorney working to bring more libertarian ideas into the Republican Party. "But Ryan is trying."

Michael Becker, an Arizona delegate at the Ron Paul rally, was less charitable.

"I'd agree with Tom Morello," he said, referring to [the scathing article written earlier this month by the rock guitarist](#). "You're the machine I'm railing against."

\* *The author was employed by the Cato Institute from 2008 to 2010.*