

## Early Republican Straw Polls Viewed As Measure of A Candidate's Ability to Organize Supporters

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By Fred Lucas, Staff Writer



*Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney speaks at the Heritage Foundation in Washington on June 1, 2009. (AP*

*File Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)*

**(CNSNews.com)** – On Saturday, Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas) came within one vote of beating former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in the Southern Republican Leadership Conference (SRLC) straw poll in New Orleans.

Romney won 439 votes to Paul's 438 out of a total of 1,764 votes cast. Each man received 24 percent of the vote.

The poll in New Orleans came more than a month after Paul defeated Romney in a straw poll at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C. There, Paul captured 31 percent of the vote to Romney's 22 percent, out of the 2,395 votes cast.

Neither straw poll was a scientific sampling of likely Republican primary voters for 2012, but they do indicate how well candidates can organize for an event.



*Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas). Photo from the congressman's Web site.*

“We know that Ron Paul has very well-organized supporters who (are) enthusiastically turning out and publicizing straw polls. That could lead to over-performance in straw polls,” David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, told CNSNews.com.

“On the other hand, enthusiasm and effort do count in politics,” he said. “(Republicans) ought to consider the possibility that it isn’t just that -- there is a reason that Ron Paul has attracted significant support in 2007, 2008 and now on into 2010.”

Organizing voters is what elections are all about, said Gary Howard, spokesman for the Campaign for Liberty, a political organizing group that emerged from Paul’s 2008 presidential campaign.

“What’s the complaint? That you can organize supporters and they will come vote for you?” Howard told CNSNews.com. “That’s how elections work. If you can’t organize supporters to come out and vote, you won’t win.”

Paul, an 11-term congressman, made a strong showing over the weekend against Republican establishment candidates such as Romney and 2008 GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who came in third place with 18 percent of the vote.

Paul was the 1988 Libertarian Party presidential nominee. In the 2008 cycle, he ran against the Republican establishment as a Republican, opposing the war in Iraq and generally

opposing international intervention policies.

Regardless of his strong straw-poll showings, Paul is still a long shot for actually winning his party's nomination, said Michael Hagen, a political science professor at Temple University. But his performance should not be ignored.

"At the very least, this shows Mr. Paul has a campaign organization that has an appeal and can deliver votes," Hagen told CNSNews.com. "There is afoot a lot of enthusiasm out there. It will be interesting to see which Republican candidate capitalizes on that."



*Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin addresses Tea Party supporters during a rally in the desert outside Searchlight, Nev., on Saturday, March 27, 2010. (AP Photo/Isaac Brekken)*

The other two candidates, Romney and Palin, have shortcomings with voters, said Jesse Richman, a political science assistant professor at Old Dominion University.

Many conservatives distrust Romney for signing into law a Massachusetts health care overhaul that included mandates to purchase insurance, and which is seen as a precursor to the recently enacted Democratic federal health care package.

Other in the party establishment do not believe that Palin is electable.

So, if the party does not rally around a candidate, it could leave an opening for Paul's activist base to carry Paul far in the nomination battle.

“He has won a lot of support from the tea parties, which is an important movement in the Republican Party,” Richman told CNSNews.com. “He was very successful in raising money. Paul would be less out of the mainstream of the party than he was. Foreign policy is less important now, and that is where he was out of step with the party. He has a dedicated set of activists. If he runs in 2012, he has a serious chance to win.”

Paul would be helped by a weak economy and the lack of a strong candidate for the Republican base to rally around.

At this point, Paul’s performance in straw polls has little meaning, said Robert Oldendick, a political science professor at the University of South Carolina, where the first southern state presidential primary is held.

“I don’t sense an increase greatly in his support,” Oldendick told CNSNews.com. “Certainly, there is a group of supporters, but it is not overwhelming.”

But the showing in New Orleans this weekend showed that the CPAC win was not happenstance, said Campaign for Liberty’s Howard, who stressed that the non-profit organization was not endorsing a candidate. He noted that Paul simply supports the issues that Campaign for Liberty supports.

“This shows that even though the GOP establishment might be clueless, the GOP activists are not clueless and want a return to constitutional conservative values, and only Ron Paul has 100 percent credibility on those issues,” Howard said.

Howard added that it was Ron Paul’s supporters who held the first Tea Party rally after the 2008 race, although he does not believe the movement is tied to any candidate.

When speaking to the SRLC gathering this weekend, Paul set himself apart from the Republican establishment, namely on foreign policy and earmarks.

“If you vote against an earmark, you don’t save a penny,” he said. “What you do is you take the responsibility away from the Congress and you give the money to the executive branch and, believe me, they’ll waste it even more than the Congress will waste it.”

“What we need is not to tinker with earmarks but to vote against the entire package, vote against the appropriation bills until we get this budget under control,” said Paul.

Later, he talked about foreign policy, saying that in Washington, there are two problems with spending: "We have conservatives and liberals," Paul said. "They both like to spend. Conservatives spend money on different things, they like embassies and they like occupation, they like the empire, they like to be in 135 countries and 700 bases."

Republican leaders fear that millions of conservatives are wondering why the United States is so vested around the world, said Boaz of the Cato Institute.

"The Republican party is desperate to avoid a debate on foreign policy," Boaz said. "Ron Paul represents the old right, the position of Robert Taft, who did not believe we should be policemen to the world. Ron Paul is the last bridge to the old right and the new post- Cold War position on the right."

However, Boaz said he did not believe Paul could win the nomination for several reasons: He noted that a majority of Republicans do not yet support his foreign policy views, House members typically do not get elected, and because of his age -- Paul will be 77 years old in 2012.

Howard does not believe age would be an issue, recalling that President Ronald Reagan was in his 70s when he ended his second term. "It shouldn't be an issue. It should only depend on where you stand on the issues," Howard said.

On a broader note, Ron Paul's son Rand Paul is leading in his tea-party-fueled campaign for U.S. Senate against Kentucky Secretary of State Trey Grayson in the Republican primary, according to a Survey USA poll in March. The poll has Paul up 42 percent to 27 percent, with a substantial number of undecided voters.

But Grayson has made Ron Paul's views an issue in the campaign, prompting the younger Paul to take a slightly more hawkish stance than his father on national security issues, said Scott Lasley, a political science professor at Western Kentucky University.

"Neither candidate has approached 50 percent, but the tea party has given Paul a forum," Lasley told CNSNews.com. "It shows the strength of the tea party and their ability to raise a candidate's level of visibility."