



Posted on Sun, May. 30, 2010

What is Rand Paul's political philosophy?

Candidate's political views resist a single label

By Bill Estep

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Commentators have put a lot of labels on Rand Paul, Kentucky's Republican U.S. Senate nominee. Extremist. Constitutionalist. Face of the Tea Party movement. Defender of racists. And, most often, libertarian.

The effort by pundits, politicians and journalists across the country to peg Paul's views ratcheted up after he won the primary May 18, then promptly threw cold water on the win with comments suggesting private business owners should have the right to discriminate against minorities.

His philosophical point on property rights has continued to echo on talk shows, opinion pages and the Internet, shifting focus away from Paul's core message of limiting government spending and balancing the budget.

The Bowling Green eye surgeon's stumble has raised a whole new line of questioning about his ideology — a mix of ideas from libertarians, social conservatives and the Tea Party movement — and how it would apply to a seemingly endless list of other government programs and mandates.

Where does he draw the line on consumer-protection laws? What about Wall Street regulations and workplace-safety rules? Is the Americans with Disabilities Act too onerous?

"These questions aren't going to go away," said Scott Lasley, a political science professor at Western Kentucky University.

Paul hasn't talked with reporters at length since the week of his primary victory, but he's scheduled to appear on WHAS radio in Louisville on Monday. He was not available for an interview with the Herald-Leader last week, his campaign said.

On May 19, Paul said on MSNBC and National Public Radio he is against discrimination, but he questioned whether the 1964 Civil Rights Act law went too far in imposing government control on private businesses. Among other things, the act outlawed racial segregation in restaurants and other public accommodations.

Paul's comments about civil rights echo a letter he wrote to the Bowling Green Daily News in 2002 about the federal Fair Housing Act.

In defending private-property rights, Paul said public institutions should be barred from discriminating based on a person's beliefs or attributes, but not private entities. One example he gave was that of a retirement community that didn't want to let in residents with noisy children.

"Decisions concerning private property and associations should in a free society be unhindered," Paul wrote. "A free society will abide unofficial, private discrimination — even when that means allowing hate-filled groups to exclude people based on the color of their skin."

Amid the recent furor over his comments on the Civil Rights Act, Paul said he abhors racism and would have voted for the landmark law. That stance led to charges of flip-flopping.

"Was (Paul) being untruthful on the occasions when he said the federal government has no authority to outlaw racial discrimination in private businesses such as restaurants?" Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson wrote. "Or is he being untruthful now in claiming he would have voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964?"

The Libertarian Party of Kentucky disavowed Paul last week, issuing a news release that was "an effort to clear our good name" after Paul's comments on civil rights.

Others defended Paul, saying he was merely raising a philosophical point about the limits of federal power and is not a racist.

"When one listens to him talk, one gets the sense that he comprehends that the Founders of America feared that the biggest threat to our rights was from our own government," the New York Sun said in an editorial.

The attention to just about everything Paul says isn't likely to wane as he runs what promises to be a hard-fought race against Attorney General Jack Conway, the Democratic Senate nominee.

Democrats hope to paint Paul as too extreme for most voters.

After Paul stumbled on civil rights, Conway said Paul was promoting a "narrow and rigid ideology." Paul responded that Conway and Democrats were lying about him.

'Libertarian instincts'

Paul — whose father, Ron, was the Libertarian Party nominee for president in 1988 — clearly has "libertarian instincts," said Lasley, the political science professor.

The general libertarian philosophy is one of smaller government, lower taxes, a free-market economy, and little government control over individuals.

The national Libertarian Party opposes the war in Iraq, federal interference in education, gun control and government bailouts of businesses. It supports requiring a balanced federal budget.

Many of Paul's positions are in line with those views.

For instance, he has said he would have voted against the Iraq war and the federal bank bailout; he wants to abolish the federal Department of Education; he says farm subsidies are a bad idea; and he favors forcing a balanced federal budget.

He also has spoken disapprovingly of the Patriot Act, passed in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, as an intrusion on personal freedoms. That is in line with the Libertarian Party.

"There are very few things that the government should be doing," Paul said in a speech to a group of conservatives in Lexington in June 2009, which is posted on his campaign Web site.

However, the Libertarian Party platform also opposes laws against recreational drug use, says there should be no government involvement in the issue of abortion and indicates support for allowing same-sex couples to marry.

Those social issues are where Paul and libertarians part ways, observers said.

Social conservative

Paul, for example, is strongly anti-abortion and has said he would support a law to end legal abortion.

Some libertarians oppose abortion based on a belief that life begins at conception and, because government exists to protect individual rights, that life should be protected. But David Boaz, executive vice-president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian research group, said 80 percent of libertarians are pro-choice.

Boaz said he doubts Paul agrees with the libertarian view on drug laws, either, though The Wall Street Journal reported that Paul has expressed "misgivings" about the nation's drug laws.

Marriage is another difference. Paul supports the "discriminatory one man, one woman" definition of marriage, according to a news release on the Libertarian Party of Kentucky Web site.

"He's not in line with us. He agrees with us on some things," Ken Moellman, the state party chairman, said in an interview.

Moellman said Paul is a social conservative and wants to use government to enforce that view — something libertarians don't favor.

Joshua Koch, the state Libertarian Party vice chairman, said he left the party structure in 2009 to work with Paul's campaign but became disillusioned in December.

Koch said Paul's positions shifted during the campaign, away from libertarian views.

For instance, Paul at one point said detainees at the U.S. military facility at Guantánamo Bay should be sent

back to their home countries, but now says he wants to continue holding them there, Koch said.

The Libertarian Party advocates closing the facility. "He shifted because it was easier" politically, Koch said.

However, Paul said during a debate on Kentucky Educational Television he had never advocated closing Guantánamo Bay. Opponents had distorted his position on that issue and others where he supposedly flip-flopped, he has said.

Constitutionalist

Paul identified himself closely during the campaign with the Tea Party movement, the grass-roots protest that has flowered the last year in response to perceptions that taxes are too high and that federal spending and the deficit are out of control.

There is no central Tea Party organization or platform. Generally, though, activists said the core values of the movement are fiscal responsibility, free markets and constitutionally limited government — all things Paul has embraced.

"Getting behind Rand Paul was pretty easy," said Frank Hudson, leader of the Tea Party organization in Whitley County and pastor of Cornerstone Christian Fellowship.

The Tea Party is a coalition of libertarians and conservatives, Boaz said.

"I think it's absolutely correct that Rand Paul is one of the obvious, emerging leaders of the Tea Party," Boaz said.

There have been charges of racism within the movement, but Dewey Clayton, a political science professor at the University of Louisville, said he does not think Paul is a racist.

The movement provided a ready base for Paul as he geared up for his Senate campaign, Clayton said.

"It made sense for him to sort of latch on to the Tea Partiers," Clayton said.

The Wall Street Journal described Paul's political view as fitting within a "constitutionalist" philosophy, which argues the federal government has no right to dictate private business practices.

Paul and others trace the beginning of a government they see as too big and intrusive to the 1930s and '40s, when Congress passed, and courts upheld, provisions such as a federal minimum wage and expanded government control over businesses.

Paul's views are not unusual in the Tea Party movement, but, put into practice, would undermine much of the structure of the federal government that has been in place for decades, some observers argue.

"The federal government puts limits on pollutants from corporations, monitors the safety of toys and other products and ensures a safe food supply — much of which Mr. Paul's philosophy could put in question," The Wall Street Journal said in an article.