

## David Harsanyi: Ron Paul is not the solution to any problem, real or imagined

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What are we to make of the Republican Party's future now that libertarian Rep. Ron Paul won the presidential straw poll at the well-attended Conservative Political Action Conference last week?

Is the GOP about to transform into the party of the gold standard?

Let's, for a moment, forget Paul (and how I wish this could be a permanent condition, considering the congressman is neither a serious politician nor — and I can't stress this enough — a serious thinker).

Libertarianism offers conservatives — many of them new to political activism — an earnest ideological alternative to the process-heavy politics that dominate Washington.

It allows Republicans to cleanse themselves of the GOP's failure to deliver on promises of smaller government and fiscal restraint.

None of which is new. The 1964 Barry Goldwater would be considered a libertarian today by many measures. The National Review constructed a "fusionist" effort to bring the parties together.

Ronald Reagan explained to Reason magazine back in 1975 that "the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism."

Two sticking points preventing this fling from turning into something more serious have been social issues and war. Has anything changed to alter the dynamics of the relationship? Probably not.

Patrick Buchanan recently claimed that the GOP is showing signs of turning away from its recent foreign policy positions.

The focus of policy may have changed — and perhaps there's more reluctance in nation building — but polls pretty clearly illustrate Republicans still believe in a robust and proactive national defense.

Social issues are far more complex — and they always have been, despite caricatures. But the reality is that most of the cultural issues that divide Americans have been mired in political stalemates.

You can debate abortion all day long; policy won't be changing.

Economics, on the other hand, touches almost everything in a tangible way. That — and one of the most aggressive left-wing economic agendas in American history — makes the libertarian fiscal message seductive.

Does that mean we need Paul?

"Congressman Paul is committed to bringing the conservative movement back to its traditional platform of limited government, balanced budgets and a foreign policy of nonintervention," claims Jesse Benton, Paul's spokesman.

If only it stopped there. Paul isn't a traditional conservative. His obsession with long-decided monetary policy and isolationism are not his only half-baked crusades.

Paul's newsletters of the '80s and '90s were filled with anti-Semitic and racist rants, proving his slumming in the ugliest corners of conspiracyland today is no mistake.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Paul is that thousands of intellectually curious young people will have read his silly books, including "End the Fed," as serious manifestoes.

Though you wouldn't know it by listening to Paul or reading his words, libertarians do have genuine ideas that conservatives might embrace.

A serious libertarian, David Boaz at the Cato Institute, found that 14 percent of American voters could be classified as libertarian.

"Other surveys," he points out, "find a larger number of people who hold views that are neither consistently liberal nor conservative, but are best described as libertarian."

Seeing as the two top concerns at CPAC were "reducing size of federal government" (35 percent) followed by "reducing government spending," it is obvious the message of individual freedom and small government has resonance.

But accepting Ron Paul as the leader of this — or, actually, any — charge is a mistake for both parties.

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