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Libertarians, How Do They Work?

Posted Friday, August 20, 2010 4:00 PM | By [David Weigel](#)

If you're in D.C., [you can catch me speaking](#) at the Cato Institute about Tea Party politics. If you can't make it, here's the gist of what I'll say.

Let's start with excerpts from two articles from The Washington Post. Both are about Rand Paul, the GOP nominee for U.S. Senate in Kentucky. This one is from May 13.

Paul's campaign stops are feisty affairs at which supporters hoot and cheer as he weaves his personal biography and a list of grievances with Washington into a populist call to arms. The founder of the anti-tax organization Kentucky Taxpayers United, Paul rails against what he describes as Washington's unsustainable spending, crippling debt, career politicians with no term limits, a "socialist" health-care law and a failure to close the nation's borders to illegal immigrants.

This one is from May 21.

Republican Senate candidate Rand Paul of Kentucky thrust himself, his party and the movement into an uncomfortable conversation about the federal government's role in prohibiting racial discrimination and about a period of history that most politicians consider beyond debate.

That's a pretty serious tone change. What happened in the week between those two articles? You know the answer: Paul won. He defeated the GOP's hapless establishment candidate in a landslide, and then he took a victory lap with a bunch of media interviews. Paul thought he knew what he'd be getting, because in the year he'd spent campaigning for the nomination, he'd become a symbol of the Tea Party movement, asked to explain what he disliked about the Republican Party, why Americans were pouring into the streets with Gadsden flags – you know, easy stuff. But the moment he won, he was asked by NPR to apply his libertarian philosophy to enforcement of the Civil Rights Act, and asked to explain a 2002 letter he wrote arguing that businesses had the right to discriminate.

I talked to Paul's campaign team a lot that week, and got the sense that they were genuinely surprised by their treatment from the press. Coming off of a victory bigger than anyone expected, they didn't expect to deal with theoretical and accusatory questions like this? I don't think they were naive; I think they were the first people to feel what it's like when the optimism and confidence of the tea party runs up against the iron wall of political coverage.

We're starting to get used to this kind of coverage, and I should say that it's been influenced by the Democratic Party's strategy of portraying Republicans as undisciplined and taken over by weird morlocks from the heartland. When one party pushes a line, reporters spend a lot of time asking the other party if it's true. But if the media's used to hearing that from Democrats, it's not actually used to hearing that from Republican candidates. Republicans are supposed to like tax cuts and defense spending and, usually, enormous walls along the border. They're not supposed to make existential challenges to every aspect of the modern welfare state. And it's not just journalists who think this. We're finding that voters aren't sure how to deal with it, either.

This isn't to soft-sell the advances that libertarian ideas have made since January 2009, when Barack Obama took office. The period from February 2009, when CNBC's Rick Santelli made his rant about HAMP, and May 2010, when Rand Paul won his primary, saw a mainstreaming of libertarian ideas unlike anything we've seen before. Just look at what happened with Rand's father, Ron Paul. The political press wasn't very interested in his presidential campaign, except as a joke. It was especially uninterested in his long lectures about the evils of the Federal Reserve. But today, Paul has been incredibly successful in getting Fed-monitoring legislation through

and the Fed is probably as unpopular as it's ever


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And this wasn't the only issue on which libertarians made upground. Starting in February 2009, they made a hard bet against the Keynesianspending plans in the stimulus package, and it was the arguments of institutions like this one that girded Republicans to vote almost unanimously against it. They opposed the Democrats' agenda at a time when the press took that agenda very seriously, taking for granted that voters had given Obama a mandate for a New Deal-style program that everyone knew was the only way out of the recession. In March 2009, the Gallup Poll asked Americans who they trusted more to solve our economic problems, the government or businesses. Government won out, by a 53-42 margin. Nearly one-third of Republicans said they trusted the government over business. And yet while they failed to stop some of Obama's biggest agenda items, libertarians have gotten the country back to trusting business over government. It was the rules of the Senate, really, that slowed down the progress of Obama's agenda, but ask any Republicans who worked to slow it down and they'll tell you that the pressure from outside – literally, by March 2010 there were raucous rallies outside of Congress as it debated health care reform.

So libertarians have had incredible success at convincing their fellow Americans that Barack Obama's neo-New Deal can't work. With the Tea Party movement – which is not explicitly libertarian, but which takes its economic cues from libertarian economists and thinkers – they've organized an effective political force that can win Republican primaries.

But have libertarians convinced Americans to replace Obama's ideas with theirs? The jury's out, but Rand Paul's experience wasn't very promising. Before he won his nomination, the press covered him as a phenomenon and focused on his criticism of both parties. There wasn't much examination of what, as a senator, he'd do. That started the minute he won his primary and it hasn't stopped, and the result has been a much closer race in Kentucky than anyone could have expected in such a bad year for Democrats. The latest poll in the field has Paul tied with his Democratic opponent, Jack Conway.

Should this surprise any of us? Not unless we have extremely short memories. One thing we learned in 2008 and are relearning now is that voters care more about economic conditions than they care about ideology. They voted for Barack Obama because they were panicked about the economy, and Democrats took the opportunity to enact as much progressive policy as possible. In 2010, voters are going to reject a lot of Democrats because they blame them for the bad economy. Libertarians and Tea Partiers have laid plenty of groundwork for those voters to attribute the doldrums to deficit spending and regulation, but that's not the same thing as having those voters embrace libertarianism.

You're seeing how this works in some other big races. In Nevada, Sharron Angle won her primary partly because her opponents imploded, partly because she had the strongest libertarian credentials – years of fighting for entitlement reform, for example, and explaining that Social Security was unsustainable. She started slipping behind in polls, so she put out a new ad that portrayed her talking to senior citizens about how she wanted to make sure Social Security money was stashed in a lockbox and they'd get everything they paid for. That's pretty libertarian, I guess, if your ideas about free markets come from Al Gore.

Hopefully, I'm the most pessimistic person you're going to hear from today. And I'm not even that pessimistic. I don't think libertarian candidates are going to go down in flames. But I don't think you can say that Americans are embracing their ideas as much as they're turning away from policies and incumbents that they consider failures. When libertarian candidates are completely up-front, they get tripped up; they run into voters who are afraid that they're going to lose benefits they've paid for. This is a better problem than libertarians used to have, when they were scrambling for 5 percent in New Hampshire primaries. What we need to see, though, is whether libertarians can get past the apprehensions, win, and govern.

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