

Ron Paul ▼ : Too Strong for the 'Tea Party'?

BYLINE: By Shawn Zeller, CQ Staff

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For the first 35 years of his political career, [Ron Paul](#) cemented a Washington reputation as little more than a good-natured congressional oddity. His libertarian ideology placed him so far outside the mainstream of the Republican Party, to which he nominally belonged, that he played essentially no legislative leadership role; he's never even held the top Republican seat on a House subcommittee, even though he's been elected to represent parts of the Texas Gulf coast 11 times, on and off, since 1976.

Instead, the obstetrician-turned-congressman is known more than anything as "Dr. No," the lawmaker most likely to cast a singular dissenting vote against even the most anodyne-sounding legislation. He's done so 81 times on the House floor since the start of 2006, most recently on a measure expressing condolences to victims of the earthquake in Haiti.

But Paul's irrelevant gadfly persona inside the Beltway has very little to do with how he's known in the rest of the country, where his absolutist stands against almost all aspects of the federal government have made him a cult hero to conservatives and the "tea party" crowd's favorite member of Congress.

Since the movement has so far been unable to send one of their own to Capitol Hill, Paul retains a unique position in the tea party pecking order as an anti-establishment figure who's infiltrated the establishment without being co-opted by it. His standing was affirmed two weekends ago when a surge in voting by tea party sympathizers pushed Paul to a first-place finish, with 31 percent, in a 2012 presidential straw poll taken at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference convention. (In second place, 9 percentage points behind, was a favorite of establishment Republican business interests, former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts.)

But Paul's standing, both in his own view and those familiar with the evolving tea party dynamic, will probably be short-lived. "No way," he said last week when asked if he wanted to be the movement's leader, mainly because "I don't think it's a unified movement."

At 74, he's not planning a third run for the White House -- either as a Republican, as he did two years ago, or as a third-party standard-bearer, which he was as the Libertarian nominee in 1988. "As someone who's not going to be the presidential nominee in 2012 and who doesn't look like he'll be a third-party candidate, he's a little bit of a placeholder" as a tea party spokesman, said Walter J. Stone, a political science professor at the University of California at Davis.

Many of Paul's most ardent supporters in the movement concede as much. He's too old, lacks sufficient charisma and has a habit of making off-the-wall remarks, they say. "We have to find a [Ron Paul](#) ▼ with the look and presentation of Ronald Reagan," said Robin Stublen of the Tea Party Patriots.

Beyond that, there is some significant daylight between Paul and many tea party adherents. While they share a focus on shrinking the size and influence of the federal government, not all tea party group members would go so far as Paul and abolish most federal agencies, including the IRS and Federal Reserve, while ending the personal income tax and returning to a gold standard. Paul has not been averse to "earmarks," working to get pieces of federal spending packages that he opposed spent nonetheless on projects in his congressional district. His isolationist views -- he opposes foreign aid and international trade deals and cast one of the six GOP votes in 2002 against authorizing the Iraq War -- put him directly at odds with the large number of tea party adherents who advocate a globally dominant military, an intensified counterterrorism campaign and an assertively interventionist foreign policy.

And, on matters important to social conservatives, his record is mixed. While he opposes abortion rights and says the institution of marriage should be reserved for unions of a man and a woman, his libertarianism extends to opposing a constitutional amendment that would prohibit same-sex marriage and a declaration that federal efforts to combat drug use should be abandoned. In September, when the Family Research Council -- the leading advocacy group for social conservatives in Washington -- held its 2012 presidential straw poll, Paul finished last with only 2 percent of the vote.

So, while Paul has credited himself with being a driving force behind one of the movement's very first events -- a December 2007 rally in Boston on the 234th anniversary of when the Sons of Liberty tossed crates of tea into the harbor to protest new British taxes -- others say all the national attention has gone to his head, and that his views don't align closely enough with theirs. As a result, Paul faces three challengers in this week's Texas Republican primary with ties to the movement. (He's nonetheless a safe bet to be nominated for re-election and to win in November.)

No Compromise

"They've realized government doesn't work and that they can't expect too much from government, and I've been voting against big government the whole time I've been here," Paul said last week when asked, in a conversation just off the House floor, to assess his popularity with tea party adherents. But while he's revered among those people for "saying one thing and sticking to my guns," he says, it's that very reputation that probably makes him ill-suited to making the compromises necessary to unify such a disparate group.

Whatever their reservations, tea party activists are tickled by the displeasure and anxiety that Paul's straw poll victory stirred among Republican elders, who are more often than not derided as inauthentic conservatives more interested in preserving their own power than in furthering conservative principles. "He does provide at this point a very useful vehicle for people who want to stick it to the Republican establishment," says Michael D. Tanner, a senior fellow at the **Cato Institute**, a libertarian think tank in Washington.

For their part, establishment Republicans assume that Paul's standing as a player at the national level will continue its steady fade. (When he ran for the 2008 GOP nomination, he drew less than 6 percent of the primary vote nationally and didn't win any of those contests, but he drew more than 10 percent of the vote in seven states and edged the eventual nominee, Sen. John McCain, in the Alaska, Nevada and Montana caucuses.) Were his popularity within the party to rise much further, GOP operatives say, Paul's unusual libertarian platform would threaten to drive deep wedges in the party's traditional coalition of fiscal conservatives, neo-conservative defense hawks and socially conservative culture warriors.

Still, for all their qualms about Paul, Republicans eager to turn the tea party movement to their advantage are starting to take his message more seriously. Former Gov. Gary E. Johnson of New Mexico, who's gearing up for his own presidential run in two years, is framing his message on Paul's, for instance. Another 2012 aspirant, former Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, recently endorsed Paul's son Rand, who is relying on tea party support in his increasingly competitive bid for the GOP nomination for the open Senate seat in Kentucky.

And even on Capitol Hill, Dr. No is gaining much more than his usual share of attention among his colleagues in the GOP caucus. His database of the people who gave \$35 million to his 2008 campaign, for instance, is a hot commodity among colleagues eager to boast of their own deficit-busting credentials to potential donors. And Paul's current crusade against the Fed -- rather than focus on his cause for the central bank's abolition, these days he's promoting

legislation that would mandate a top-to-bottom audit of its books -- now lists all 177 other House Republicans as cosponsors. Although it's not an outcome Paul was satisfied with, a version of that audit measure was included in the bill to revamp the regulation of financial services the House passed in December -- which Paul joined a unified GOP bloc in opposing.

For now, Paul said he's satisfied to use his standing to advance the tea party adherents' legislative goals. "They are the ones that got that audit-the-Fed bill passed," he said.

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