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libertarian

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- n. 1. a person who believes in the doctrine of the freedom of the will
2. a person who believes in full individual freedom of thought, expression and action
3. a freewheeling rebel who hates wiretaps, loves Ron Paul and is redirecting politics

By Nick Gillespie and Matt Welch
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How to make sense of the [Ron Paul](#) revolution? What's behind the improbably successful (so far) presidential campaign of a 72-year-old 10-term Republican congressman from [Texas](#) who pines for the gold standard while drawing praise from another relic from the hyperinflationary 1970s, punk-rocker Johnny Rotten?

Now with about 5 percent (and climbing) support in polls of likely Republican voters, Paul set a one-day [GOP](#) record by raising \$4.3 million on the Internet from 38,000 donors on Nov. 5 -- [Guy Fawkes](#) Day, the commemoration of a British anarchist who plotted to blow up Parliament and kill King James I in 1605. Paul's campaign, which is three-quarters of the way to its goal of raising "\$12 Million to Win" by Dec. 31, didn't even organize the fundraiser -- an independent-minded supporter did.

When a fierce Republican foe of the wars on drugs and terrorism is able, without really trying, to pull in a record haul of campaign cash on a day dedicated to an attempted regicide, it's clear that a new and potentially transformative force is growing in American politics.

That force is less about Paul than about the movement that has erupted around him -- and the much larger subset of Americans who are increasingly disillusioned with the two major political parties' soft consensus on making government ever more intrusive at all levels, whether it's listening to phone calls without a warrant, imposing fines of half a million dollars for broadcast "obscenities" or jailing grandmothers for buying prescribed marijuana from legal dispensaries.

Paul, who entered Congress in 1976, has been dubbed "Dr. No" by his colleagues because of his consistent nay votes on federal spending, military intervention in [Iraq](#) and elsewhere, and virtually all expansions of federal power (he cast one of three GOP votes against the original USA Patriot Act). But his philosophy of principled libertarianism is anything but negative: It's predicated on the fundamental notion that a smaller government allows individuals the freedom to pursue happiness as they see fit.

Given such a live-and-let-live ethos, it's no surprise that at a time when people run screaming from such labels as "liberal" and "conservative," you can hardly turn around in Washington, [Hollywood](#) or even [Berkeley](#) without running into another self-described libertarian.

The lefty Internet titan Markos "[Daily Kos](#)" Moulitsas penned a widely read manifesto last year pegging the future of his party to the "Libertarian Democrat." The conservative pundit Jonah Goldberg declared this year that he's "much more of a libertarian" lately. [Bill Maher](#), [Christopher Hitchens](#), Tucker Carlson, "South Park" co-creator Matt Stone -- self-described libertarians all. Surely it's a milestone when [Drew Carey](#), the new host of that great national treasure "[The Price Is Right](#)," becomes an outspoken advocate of open borders, same-sex marriage, free speech and repealing drug prohibition. As Michael Kinsley, an arch purveyor of conventional wisdom, wrote recently in [Time magazine](#), such people are going to be "an increasingly powerful force in politics."

Kinsley is hardly alone in recognizing this trend. In April 2006, the [Pew Research Center](#) published a study suggesting that 9 percent of Americans -- more than enough to swing every presidential election since 1988 -- espouse a "libertarian" ideology that opposes "government regulation in both the economic and the social spheres." That is, a good chunk of your fellow citizens are fiscally conservative and

socially liberal; in bumper-stickerese, they love their countrymen but distrust their government. Anyone looking to win elections -- or to make sense of contemporary U.S. politics -- would do well to understand the deep and growing reservoir that Paul is tapping into.

Though relatively unknown at the national level, Paul is hardly an unknown legislative quantity. A former Libertarian Party presidential candidate, he has at various times called for abolishing the [Internal Revenue Service](#), the [CIA](#) and several Cabinet-level agencies. A staunch opponent of abortion, he nonetheless believes that federal bans violate the more basic principle of delegating powers to the states. A proponent of a border wall with [Mexico](#) (nativist [CNN](#) host [Lou Dobbs](#) fawned over Paul earlier this year), he is the only GOP candidate to come out against any form of national I.D. card.

Such positions may not be fully consistent or equally attractive, but Paul's insistence on a constitutionally limited government has won applause from surprising quarters. Singer [Barry Manilow](#) donated the maximum \$2,300 to his campaign; the hipster singer-songwriter [John Mayer](#) was videotaped yelling "Ron Paul knows the Constitution!" and 67,000 people have signed up for Paul-related Meet Up pages on the Internet. On ABC's "This Week" recently, [George Will](#) half-jokingly cautioned his fellow pundits, "Don't forget my man Ron Paul" in the [New Hampshire](#) primary. Fellow panelist Jake Tapper seconded the emotion, saying, "He really is the one true straight talker in this race."

Yet Paul's success has mostly left the mainstream media and pundits flustered, if not openly hostile. [The Associated Press](#) recently treated the Paul phenomenon like an alien life form: "The Texas libertarian's rise in the polls and in fundraising proves that a small but passionate number of Americans can be drawn to an advocate of unorthodox proposals." Republican pollster Frank Luntz has denounced Paul's supporters as "the equivalent of crabgrass . . . not the grass you want, and it spreads faster than the real stuff." And conservative syndicated columnist Mona Charen said out loud what many campaign reporters have no doubt been thinking all along: "He might make a dandy new leader for the Branch Davidians."

When conservatives feel comfortable mocking the victims gunned down by Clinton-era attorney general [Janet Reno's FBI](#) in [Waco](#), Tex., in 1993, it suggests that a complacent and increasingly authoritarian establishment feels threatened.

And little wonder. In the 1990s, conservative Republicans rose to power by relentlessly attacking Big Government. Yet the minute they took control of both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, they kicked out the jams on even a semblance of fiscal responsibility, signing off on the [Medicare](#) prescription drug benefit and building literal and figurative bridges to nowhere. From 2001 to 2008, federal outlays will have grown by an estimated 29 percent in inflation-adjusted terms, according to the [Office of Management and Budget](#).

The biggest Big Government expansion during the Bush era is the one that Americans now despise most: the wars in Iraq and [Afghanistan](#), whose direct costs are already an estimated \$800 billion, plus 4,000 American lives. Paul's steadfast bring-the-troops-home stance -- not just from Iraq, but Korea and [Japan](#) as well -- is the major engine powering his grass-roots success as ostensibly antiwar Democrats in the majority can't or won't do anything on [Capitol Hill](#).

But if war were the only answer for his improbable run, why Ron Paul instead of the perennial peacenik [Dennis Kucinich](#), the Democratic congressman from [Ohio](#) whose apparent belief in UFOs is only slightly less kooky than his belief in the efficacy of socialized health care?

Part of the reason is Republican muscle memory. Paul's "freedom message" is the direct descendant of [Barry Goldwater](#)'s once-dominant GOP philosophy of libertarianism (which [Ronald Reagan](#) described in a 1975 Reason magazine interview as "the very heart and soul of conservatism"). But that tradition has been under a decade-long assault by religious-right moralists, neoconservative interventionists and a governing coalition that has learned to love Medicare expansion and appropriations pork.

So Paul's challenge represents a not-so-lonely GOP revival of unabashed libertarianism. All his major Republican competitors want to double down on Bush's wars; none is stressing any limited-government themes, apart from half-hearted promises to prune pork and tinker on the margins of Social Security.

College kids (a key bloc of Paul's support) have seen no recent evidence that the GOP has anything to do with libertarianism. Yet there's no reason to believe that Democrats will do anything useful about the government intrusion that so many young people abhor: the drug war, federal bans on same-sex marriage, online poker prohibitions, open-ended deployments in Iraq.

This is the mile-wide gap in the Maginot line of "serious" Washington politics. Undergrads aren't the only ones weary of war and moralizing, and more interested in exploring new frontiers of technology and culture than in heeding the stale noise coming from inside the Beltway.

More than at any other time over the past two decades, Americans are hungering for the politics and freewheeling fun of libertarianism. And with the dreary prospect of a Giuliani vs. Clinton death match in 2008, that hunger is likely to grow even faster than the size of the federal government or the casualty toll in Iraq. Ron Paul may lose next year's battle -- though not without a memorable fight -- but the laissez-faire agitators he has helped energize will find themselves at the leading edge of American politics and culture for years to come.

gillespie@reason.com

matt.welch@reason.com

Nick Gillespie and Matt Welch are editors at Reason magazine.

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