



## The Influence of Ron Paul

### Loud Bang or Flash in the Pan?

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#### Abstract

The 2012 primary season has been one of the most volatile in recent memory, with the Republican Party struggling to settle on a candidate. The campaign has also vaulted some previously obscure politicians to national prominence, only to relegate them again to obscurity. Ron Paul has demonstrated perhaps the most dramatic transformation, from a lone voice who was once largely ignored to one of the last four candidates for the nomination, who has performed quite creditably in several primaries. In this article, I examine how much influence Paul is going to have in the short term, up to and including the Republican National Convention. I also examine how lasting his influence will be over the long term, and whether or not he will mount a third-party bid in 2012.

**Keywords:** *Ron Paul, Republican Party, 2012 election*



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The idea of the lone, independent voice, one who persists in his beliefs no matter how unpopular they might appear, only to have those concerns vindicated at a later date and so become a popular leader is a canard widely seen in westerns and other Hollywood dramas. Such drama has occurred in American politics before. The United States has featured some politicians who articulate the thoughts of a vocal minority that feel underrepresented in the two-party system. Examples include Eugene V. Debs, who criticized capitalism and U.S. involvement in World War I. Norman Thomas took up the former theme in later elections. Strom Thurmond ran against desegregation as a Dixiecrat in 1948, as did George Wallace in 1968. Ross Perot focused his campaign on Washington corruption, trade, and other sundry issues.

The 2012 election also sees the possible emergence of a third party focused around a single, lone-wolf politician who has long been ignored and now seems to be seeking some form of vindication in the Republican primaries. Ron Paul, known for his libertarian positions, outspoken criticism of the Federal Reserve, and commitment to isolationism internationally, is currently mounting his third campaign for president. In each of his previous campaigns, Paul ranked merely as a footnote. However, in a crowded field of Republican presidential hopefuls that has seen a new frontrunner every few weeks, Paul has emerged as one of only four remaining candidates. Paul finished well in Iowa, ran a distant but respectable second in New Hampshire, but did poorly in South Carolina and Florida, polling 13 and 7 percent, respectively. While it is still exceedingly unlikely that Paul will emerge as the Republican nominee, especially in wake of a disappointing performance on Super

Tuesday, it is clear that his views have gotten much more exposure than ever before, astonishing even Paul himself.

Given this performance, it is possible that Paul will wield more influence in the Republican Party than in the past. This prompts several interesting questions. First, how will Paul affect the Republican National Convention, if at all? Second, how extensive and lasting is this influence likely to be within the Republican Party? Third, will Paul conduct a third-party bid for the presidency?

Ron Paul may influence the convention, as many of his positions resonate with the Republican base, particularly the Tea Party. Other figures on the right, such as Paul Ryan (R-WI) have joined in Paul's criticism of the Federal Reserve. Paul is also pro-life, against intrusive government regulation, pro-gun, reasonably religious, and a strict Constitutional constructionist. His Air Force experience certainly does not hurt him in the eyes of the Republican base. He might also gain support as a viable alternative to Mitt Romney, who is seen as part of the establishment, Rick Santorum, who is seen as too religious and too focused on social issues, and Newt Gingrich, who is bombastic, has held positions in the past that are anathema to the Republican party, and who has personal baggage.

While his campaign stumbled in Florida and South Carolina, Paul did reasonably well in Nevada, finishing third with nearly 19 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup> Nationwide, an early February poll put Paul in second place for the Republican nomination, ahead of Newt Gingrich and only 8 points behind Mitt Romney.<sup>2</sup>

Paul also benefits from changes in the rules governing the primary season. Many primaries have moved towards proportional representation, which means that even the loser of the primary can obtain delegates by running a close second or even third. Paul does not have to win a single primary, only be a respectable also-ran. His showing just has to be strong enough to claim a number of delegates. Paul then has to hope that the two frontrunners are somewhat close in the delegate count and that Romney does not capture

enough delegates to secure the nomination. This would allow Paul to play kingmaker, an influential position. Alternately, Paul hopes that the other candidates aside from Romney drop out, leading Paul to pick up some of the “anybody but Romney” vote. While he might not have the delegates needed to stop Romney at the convention in this scenario, he would hope to have enough delegates to gain a prime speaking slot at the convention. He might even be able to make the convention less harmonious if he does not get his way.

However, Paul’s influence is extremely limited by several factors. His foreign policy repels hawks in the Republican Party.<sup>3</sup> Paul’s long-term influence is limited by his age; at 76, it is unlikely that he will be alive for another generation. While others may attempt to carry on his legacy, they will likely face criticism for jumping on the Paul bandwagon. Some of the Paulist persuasion will criticize whoever succeeds Ron Paul, as this new leader may be perceived as a mere opportunist. Last and most importantly, success in the past does not translate to success in the future. While Paul did well in Iowa, he ran a distant fourth in South Carolina and Florida. If Paul performs poorly in future primaries, his exposure to the public as well as his influence could be severely limited by the time the Republicans convene in Tampa.

Examining the states in which Paul did poorly makes his weaknesses very clear. Florida has a high population density and turnout tends to be higher in that particular primary. In this type of race, media saturation is key, and retail politics is less important. Florida voters tend to be older, and Paul’s support with the over-65 crowd is practically nonexistent. The elderly’s

lack of support for Ron Paul was dramatically demonstrated in South Carolina, where exit polls gave Paul only 7 percent of the over 65 vote.<sup>4</sup> This presents a problem for Paul, as older voters tend to turn out in greater numbers. Both Florida and South Carolina featured a diverse cross-section of the Republican Party, namely fiscal hawks, retirees and evangelicals. Paul’s inability to do well in those sorts of states augurs poorly for his ability to appeal to the wider party. Paul is also not drawing much support from the Tea Party, which is a surprise considering that this conservative group would be a natural base for Paul.<sup>5</sup>



*Congressman Ron Paul*

*Source: paul.house.gov*

The states in which Paul did well tended to favor his particular kind of politics, and many of Paul’s successes in a few states look much less impressive placed in context. Even though Paul did well in Nevada, he garnered almost exactly the same number of votes as he did in that state in 2008, whereas in other states he has markedly improved his total since the last campaign, a fact grudgingly noted by his own website.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Nevada had an electoral climate that would help a strong Paul finish. *The Wall Street Journal* of February 1, 2012 predicted this outcome and cited the state’s widely

dispersed population and generally low turnout at the polls as advantageous factors.<sup>7</sup> In this kind of environment, Paul is at his best; his organization tends to be decentralized. Turnout was low in the Nevada race, with only around 33,000 voting, as opposed to 44,000 in 2008,<sup>8</sup> meaning that Paul’s impassioned supporters skewed the numbers.

While Paul might hope for a boost from the exit of other candidates throughout the race, this may

not be a realistic hope. Gingrich and Santorum, at least for the moment, are not going anywhere.<sup>9</sup> Gingrich even alluded to some sort of agreement between Santorum and himself about how neither would drop out of the race in order to combine anti-Romney forces. If Gingrich and Santorum are that close, it would be folly to think that Santorum, on bowing out of the race, would throw his support to Paul.<sup>10</sup> In addition, two prominent Republican has-beens, Rick Perry and Herman Cain, both endorsed Gingrich.<sup>11,12</sup> Paul holds only 48 delegates as of this writing, compared with 131 for Gingrich, 252 for Santorum, and 495 for Romney, despite total spending in favor of Paul of \$32.9 million, second only to Romney. The Paul campaign appears to be failing expensively.<sup>13</sup>

These disadvantages, when compared with the advantages, seem to suggest that Paul will not be able to gather enough delegates to sway the convention. This limits his short-term influence. His long-term influence is limited as he is advancing in years and has no credible successor. However, there is one way that Paul could make a very large splash across the American political scene: by mounting an independent bid for the presidency.

At this time, one of the major questions surrounding his campaign is whether or not Paul will continue to run for president in absence of the nomination. Paul himself is noncommittal on this score, which makes political sense. A Paul third-party candidacy would work to the detriment of the eventual Republican nominee. Even though Paul's showing might not be as strong as, say, Ross Perot's, it does not have to be. The best Republican hope at this point is for a very close 2012 race. A number of swing states are in play, including some traditionally Republican strongholds such as North Carolina and Virginia. If Paul is enough of a spoiler to cost the Republican candidate a state like Ohio, the Republican nominee would have a hard time winning in 2012. Both the Republican Party and Ron Paul know this. The threat of making a third-party bid is therefore a major ace up Paul's sleeve.

In weighing the odds of a third-party bid, it is necessary to consider what Paul's objective is: getting his message across, not necessarily winning elections. A third-party bid would draw a lot of attention to the ideas that Paul espouses, and it might be possible to draw a parallel to Theodore Roosevelt's bid in 1912. While this bid was unsuccessful and fatally weakened the Republican Party in 1912, it put Progressivism on the map as a political philosophy, which led to the eventual adoption of many of the ideas that Roosevelt championed. Considering that this may be Paul's last throw on the national stage, he may be willing to throw caution to the winds and pursue a quixotic third-party bid.

Three main factors, however, make a third-party bid unlikely. First, within the Republican Party, Paul would be seen as a pariah where only yesterday he had more of an audience than ever. Second, the Paul brand's most likely, and probably most acceptable, successor is Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), elected in 2010 and already making waves in Washington. A bid by his father would put Rand in a difficult position. He could disavow the third-party bid and damage his chance to be seen as a successor to his father's ideological movement. Or, he could support the run and risk being shunned by the Senate Republican leadership, which would lessen his influence for whatever purpose he chooses to pursue. A third-party bid would also give Ron Paul more negative publicity than he has received up to the present. For example, if conservative or Republican outlets open fire on him, they have easy fodder in a series of newsletters that may have been issued with Paul's backing. These newsletters were often written in a racist and conspiratorial tone. While Paul has disavowed any connection to the newsletters, given enough exposure, the mere association with those sorts of tomes may end up seriously damaging the Paul brand.<sup>14</sup> Finally, a third-party bid would very publicly serve as a referendum on Ron Paul and his ideas. If the electorate appears to repudiate those ideas by not voting for him in large numbers, it will be much harder for Paul and his supporters to claim to represent many silent thousands.

Therefore, when we consider the fact that Paul is unlikely to succeed over the long term in rounding up Republican delegates to the extent to which he could influence the nominating process, it seems unlikely that Paul will have much influence at the Republican convention. His long-term influence is limited by the fact that he will soon go away, one way or another. So, Paul's best bet for a temporary burst of influence is to run as a third-party candidate. However, this exposure might not necessarily be positive and might lead to Paul hamstringing his son, his most logical successor for carrying the Libertarian banner. Therefore, it is most likely that Paul will attempt to hold on for as long as possible and win enough delegates to grab some attention at the Republican convention. While this number of delegates is unlikely to substantially influence the nominating process, it would demonstrate that a Paul third-party bid may be disastrous for Republican chances in 2012. Paul might use the threat of the third party bid to gain leverage in the Republican Party, but such influence will be only for a limited time. Ultimately, Paul will not become embraced by a party that paid him little heed, nor will he be another Ross Perot or Norman Thomas, who continued to work outside the two-party system. His fate will be more akin to that of Nelson Rockefeller, leader of an important wing of the Republican Party, yet a wing that never appeared as influential as it could have been.

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*Notes*

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