



Plan to Restore the Vote

Ron Paul and the Third-Party Voting Dilemma

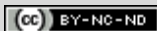
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Abstract

Texas Congressman and Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul has been a figure in American politics for more than 40 years. While Paul has commanded a dedicated support base composed of both liberals and conservatives, he remains well behind in the 2012 Republican primary race. This article examines the hypothetical case of a Ron Paul third-party presidential run, and the dilemma that voters face between voting conscientiously for Paul and voting strategically for the most electable and ideologically similar candidate.

Keywords: *Ron Paul, third parties, Republican primary*



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Since the Republican presidential primary race began, three candidates—each with their own definition of “conservative”—have claimed victories, highlighting a deep fracture in the Republican Party’s ideological framework. Front-runner Mitt Romney, who as governor of Massachusetts signed a health-care bill akin to the Affordable Care Act that every Republican candidate, including Romney, vows to repeal, attracts suspicions that he lacks core conservative convictions. Traditionalists deem former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich unfit to head a family-values party given his history of infidelity and multiple marriages. Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum’s cultural-warrior image alienates moderate Republican and independent voters and is therefore detrimental to his general election chances.

The Republican philosophy problem is not limited to individual candidates choosing separate strands of conservatism on which to model their image; it appears in the party rhetoric the candidates uniformly espouse. For instance, all of the candidates criticize President Obama’s proposed cuts to defense spending, contradicting their own promises for swift across-the-board federal deficit reduction.¹ As Pittsburgh Post-Gazette executive editor David Shribman opined, “In the old days a formula like that would be a summons for the political establishment to do something, or anything – step in to force implausible candidates from the race, step forward with a new contender in the lists or step up the pressure to bring order to the proceedings. But none of that is happening, or is likely to happen anytime soon.”²

Amidst the Republicans’ ideological disorder persists the candidacy of Texas Congressman Ron Paul. A figure in American politics for more than four decades, Paul’s libertarianism shares some tenets of American conservatism, but his position is unique in its staunch adherence to individual liberty, which transcends party lines. On domestic fiscal policy, he is largely conservative. Like his current Republican cohorts, Paul vows to repeal President Obama’s health-care reform law; however, only Paul proposes a drastic cut to presidential salary and an audit of the Federal Reserve. On foreign policy, Paul’s proposals to end all current US wars and foreign aid matches liberal anti-war sentiment to an extent, particularly among those dissatisfied with the perceived abuse of executive military power in the past two presidents’ administrations.³ And Paul’s ideology’s consistency—stated simply, that individual freedom should be preserved to the furthest extent possible—strikes a chord with 18- to 29-year-olds who tend to distill politics through a “common sense” lens.⁴ This group proved to be an invaluable resource in Obama’s election in 2008, when 68 percent of people under 30 voted for him.

The fact that Paul won the highest percentage of the young voter demographic in the Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina primaries speaks volumes to his ability to contend against the incumbent for the 18- to 29-year-old vote. Yet, a Harvard Institute of Politics survey showed that the number of 18- to 29-year-olds who plan to vote in the 2012 election is down 11 percent from 2008, a statistic that reflects this group’s general discontentment with Washington.⁵ The race’s current trajectory is also sobering for Paul. The 76-year-old is the only candidate without a primary win, and he trails in almost every poll. As the race trudges toward an eventual nominee, it is apparent that last-place Paul has but a miracle-worker’s shot at the nod. Given his loyal support from small segments of voters in both major parties, it is worth exploring whether Paul will be relevant in the general election as a third party or independent candidate. Such a scenario, hypothetical or not, has the potential to complicate the choice voters will make by presenting the dilemma of

voting their conscience for Paul or voting strategically for their preferred major party candidate on November 6.

I will first examine why Paul appeals to his supporters by explaining how his consistent, libertarian message stands out in today's fractured and hyper-polarized political climate. I will then ground my hypothetical discussion of Paul's candidacy in an examination of Ross Perot's third party presidential run in 1992 and Ralph Nader's third party run in 2000. These candidacies presented voters with the dilemma of voting strategically or voting their conscience—voting philosophies that must be taken into consideration when choosing between a minor party candidate and a major party candidate. After providing arguments for both voting strategically and voting conscientiously, I will argue that voters ought to vote their conscience, for doing so secures the existence of various opinions and leads to a more representative liberal democracy.

The current economic crisis is arguably the most pressing issue affecting the 2012 election. The debate over how our nation's recovery from the 2008 financial meltdown should be handled is as much a generational question as it is a partisan one. Most young people's economic interests are distinct from those of the older population; the former is concerned with the upkeep of the financial system in the future, whereas the latter has a vested interest in seeing their needs met today. In 2010, the federal government spent \$3.6 trillion at an interest rate of 6 percent, or \$209 billion.⁶ Young people pay most of that interest over their lifetimes, an even more disheartening fact if federal spending targets retirees through Medicare and Social Security—programs which provide little direct benefit to people under thirty.⁷ The year 2010 marked the first

time in 27 years that Social Security—a system that funnels workers' payroll taxes to retirees, survivors, and the disabled—paid more (\$49 billion) in benefits than it collected in taxes.⁸ Experts claim that a trust fund compiled from years of budget surpluses can sustain the program until 2036, when tax revenues will kick in to cover most of the costs. Still, the program is projected to run a deficit for the next 75 years, which is bad news for young people who feel as if they are funding a program from which they will never benefit.⁹

Both parties agree that spending must be reduced to prevent this deficit from happening. They disagree, however, about how much and which programs to cut. President Obama's \$3.8 trillion proposed budget aims to reduce the deficit by gradually cutting spending over a decade while increasing revenues through higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans, but policy experts who hailed the plan's broad approach to deficit reduction were quick to point out that it does little to address financing entitlements.^{10,11} The alternative Republican budget crafted by Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI) reduces spending by \$6.2 trillion over a decade, which is achieved in part by reforming and cutting entitlements.¹²



Congressman Ron Paul

Source: paul.house.gov

Ron Paul's budget, ambitiously titled "Plan to Restore America," differs from both parties in its approach to entitlements. Whereas the two major parties offer nuanced solutions to this and other political problems, Paul's strict adherence to libertarian ideology translates to predictable policies. Under his plan, Social Security would remain as is, with one glaring difference—young people would be given the choice to opt out of the system entirely.

Paul's ideologically uniform policies tend to appeal to people who self-identify as everyday voters

with simple political philosophies, as well as young voters. Many young people perceive the views of the two major parties as ways to win elections, but in Paul, they see a candidate whose libertarian message has been consistent throughout his political career.¹³ By promising to slash spending and eliminate five cabinet agencies, “Plan to Restore America” aims to deliver a balanced budget in the third year of Paul’s presidency.¹⁴ Of course, these measures produce short-term consequences as a means to long-term economic stability. Eliminating the \$15 trillion deficit by 2016 cannot happen, according to Kevin Hassett, John McCain’s former chief economic adviser, without immediately plunging the economy into recession. Nevertheless, Paul’s campaign holds strongly to the belief that deficit reduction needs immediate and serious attention. “This budget is about priorities, and we have to honor our promises to our seniors,” Paul spokesman Jesse Benton said. “We face a bankruptcy and a major financial crisis that will destroy the entire social safety net unless we take action.”¹⁵

Moreover, Paul is a staunch opponent of American intervention abroad without justification. Paul argues that the money saved from eliminating wars and foreign aid ought to be put toward programs that directly benefit Americans. “You take the elderly on Social Security—there was a contract,” Paul said in Iowa on December 28, 2011. “But we can’t honor that contract if we keep spending the money overseas.”¹⁶ This view has gained him much favor among active and retired military members, 80 percent of whom are under the age of 36.¹⁷ Paul has received almost \$114,000 in donations from active

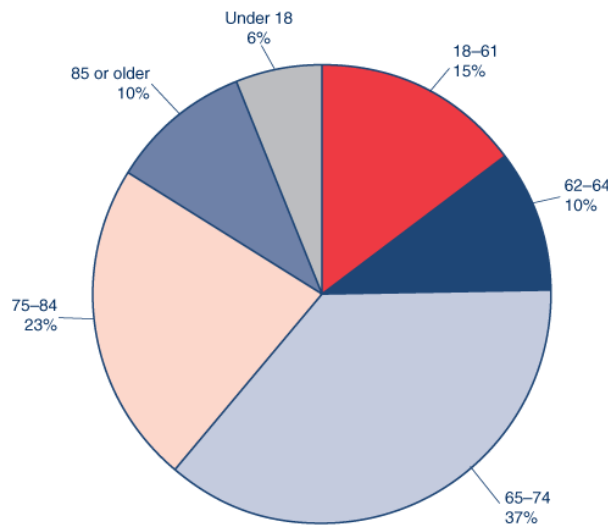
military members, the most of any candidate and nearly double the amount received by President Obama.¹⁸ His command of the veteran’s vote should only strengthen with the recent formation of “Friends of Ron Paul for President,” a military-focused super-PAC aimed at increasing awareness of Paul’s campaign among servicemen and women. While military veterans traditionally vote Republican (McCain won the veterans’ vote by 10 points in 2008, and Bush did the same by 16 points in 2004), anti-war voters on the left have recently voiced support for Paul.¹⁹ Before the primary race began, Paul led among voters who did not identify as Republican in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina;²⁰ only about half of Paul’s supporters were self-identified Republicans, compared to close to 90 percent for Romney and Gingrich.²¹ It is apparent that support for Paul from minority factions within both parties is not waning despite his highly unlikely, if not impossible, shot at being elected president.

But would these supporters vote a Ron Paul third-party or independent presidential ticket? If so, it would not be unprecedented.

Independent candidate Ross Perot and Green Party candidate Ralph Nader mounted significant third-party runs in 1992 and 2000, respectively, that presented voters with a dilemma: vote their conscience for the unelectable minor-party candidate whose beliefs they most support, or vote strategically for the potentially electable major-party candidate closest to their ideological stance in order to bring about the best political outcome.

Much like Paul today, Ross Perot championed a fiscal responsibility platform during his 1992

Social Security Beneficiaries, by Age



Source: Social Security Administration, Master Beneficiary Record, 100 percent data.

presidential run. He attacked both Republican and Democratic handling of the economy, and railed against political dysfunction in Washington that bred popular distrust in government.²² Republican voters admired his economic stance, and two months after he entered the race, a *New York Times* column called for the Democratic Party to adopt him, “the Democrats’ Ronald Reagan,” as its nominee for his anti-establishment, pro-business platform.²³ His Washington-outsider appeal (a billionaire businessman, Perot had not previously run for elected office) and tough economic reform rhetoric drew support from voters who, according to exit polls, regarded their personal finances and the state of the economy in bleaker conditions than those who voted for George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.²⁴ Despite dropping out of and reentering the race months before November, Perot claimed 19 percent of the popular vote, the most won by a third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt in 1912.

Given his bipartisan appeal, Perot’s votes had little effect on the election’s outcome. Twenty-six percent of Perot voters identified with the Democratic Party, while 31 percent identified with Republicans. His electoral presence, though indecisive, was a statement for the major-party establishment to address the nation’s pressing issues. As Perot declared to Bush and Clinton, “If you’ll do this, this, this and this for the good of the country and just stop talking about it, stop the gridlock, cut all these funny things that you’re doing, then we will go forward with you. Otherwise, we have a protest vote, and that could take one of the two of you through the tank.”²⁵ It is argued that the support for Perot’s campaign contributed to President Clinton’s focus on fiscal responsibility.

In contrast to Perot’s cross-cutting effect, Nader’s presence in the 2000 election provided an additional liberal voice to oppose conservative George W. Bush and attracted mainly civil libertarian voters within the Democratic Party who would have otherwise voted for Al Gore. Realizing this, Democratic members of Congress who had supported Nader’s causes in the past sent him an open letter: “The prospect of waking

up on November 8 to a Bush presidency is too dangerous for too many... Ralph, do not let your candidacy be the reason for that to happen. Ask your supporters in swing states to vote for Al Gore.” Nader refused. He argued that voters should vote their conscience, reminding them that, contrary to the Democratic establishment’s claims, a vote for Nader was a vote for Nader and not for Bush. The country needed radical change, he argued, and the only way to bring it about was to avoid the “lesser of two evils” and vote for him.²⁶

Voters listened. Nearly 3 million people voted for Nader, prompting former Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis to remark before the winner was announced, “It’s obvious the bulk of those [Nader] votes would have gone to Gore. If he keeps Gore from winning [the battleground states], I’ll strangle the guy with my bare hands.” Dukakis’ fears proved true. Nader received 2.7 percent of the popular vote. Exit polls showed that the vast majority of those votes came from people who would have voted for Gore in a two-candidate race with Bush. And given that the 2000 election result came down to five states with victory margins of less than one percent of the popular vote, it is clear that Nader’s presence cost Gore the election. Despite the Gore campaign’s pleas for Nader supporters to vote strategically so as to bring about the best possible political outcome, “Nader’s Raiders” voted for the candidate they believed best represented their interests: Nader.²⁷

Nader’s votes contributed to eight consecutive years of a Republican-controlled White House and raised questions as to whom—themselves or society—liberals owed their duty to vote. The 2000 election offers pragmatic support for why voters should vote strategically. It evidenced that even if a minority party candidate manages to attract votes in a closely contested election, those votes will only bring about the worst possible outcome for both that candidate and his supporters. Presumably, those votes would have otherwise gone to the major party candidate with a closer ideology to the minority party candidate. Voting for the extremely conservative or extremely liberal

minority party candidate, according to this reasoning, is self-defeating. Everyone who shares your viewpoint loses by having to endure at least four years of the candidate whose policies are extremely different to those of the unelectable candidate for whom you voted. From a practical standpoint, it seems that voters should reject the urge to vote their conscience and vote for the major party candidate who best suits their political interests.

Given that Paul appeals to segments within both major parties, it is reasonable to assume that his third-party run would likely emulate Perot's in 1992—that is, it would not have much of an electoral effect. Paul's libertarianism attracts two types of civil libertarians, those who are concerned with keeping the government out of their affairs and self-identify as Republican, and those who are proponents of moderate isolationism and largely self-identify as Democrat. The former libertarians are much more earnest in their support for Paul. Nonetheless, many liberals subscribe to his belief that the American warfare state is an unparalleled threat, and supporting Paul provides them with a pulpit to express discontent with their own party's misgivings on foreign affairs. The same applies to conservatives dissatisfied with the Republicans' approach to reducing the deficit. To these voters, Paul's economic plan represents an extreme model that can be used as a comparison for other plans and guide future critiques and revisions. In short, a vote for Paul from a member of either party protests the status quo. It is an expression of dissent and a call for both Democrats and Republicans to change their approaches to government.

Extending this argument to its logical democratic conclusion—the ballot box—means that voters who genuinely support Ron Paul's message should vote for him irrespective of the impact of such votes on their preferred major party. While strategic voting holds the most pragmatic value, conscience voting is the more morally justifiable practice. Failing to vote one's conscience would restrict public debate to the views put forth by the two major parties. There might be fewer opinions that dissent from the majority. As John Stuart Mill wrote, "When there are persons to

be found, who form an exception to the apparent unanimity of the world on any subject ... it is always probable that dissentients have something worth hearing to say for themselves, and that truth would lose something by their silence."²⁸ Of course, Mill is referring to individual opinion. But the act of voting is, essentially, the act of expressing one's opinion in a politically meaningful way. So by voting conscientiously for the candidate whose beliefs a voter feels most just, the voter is expressing his or her desire to see that message made law. The elected candidate will then be pressured to at least take account of the losing votes. Failing to do so would be morally reprehensible because a liberal democracy, by definition, ought to respect the rights of everyone equally, including those in dissent. A government should therefore consider the losing candidate's message, by virtue of the votes he received, when determining law.

In saying that a government should consider the losing candidate's message, I do not mean to suggest a change to the current constitutional system for enacting laws, or a change in the "hearts and minds" of legislators so that they abandon their own political agenda for that of the losing candidate. Rather, my concern is to emphasize that a healthy democracy characterized by a marketplace of diverse ideas which legislators can consider in determining law is only obtainable if voters express their true political beliefs at the polls. Elected officials can only consider diverse viewpoints if voters vote in accordance with their true political beliefs.

Furthermore, the notion that governments should take account of each voter's interests is not a novel one. For centuries, theorists have argued that representatives should act as trustees whose obligation is to serve the public good, not solely appease the people who voted for them. Perhaps most notably, Edmund Burke wrote in 1774 that the British Parliament "is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests ... [but] a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where not local purposes, not local prejudices

ought to guide but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole.”²⁹ Though he declares that the representative’s duty is to serve a singular, national interest, and not a variety of diverse interests, Burke’s statement is useful in that it rejects the notion that legislators should merely serve the interests of those who elected them. And moreover, scholars have amended Burke’s conception of the “national interest” to include instances where “a party [or pressure group] may be so strong in a district that, in the representative’s mind, the interests of district and party [or pressure group] are identical.”³⁰ Thus, legislators should compromise among various interests to form the national interest. I contend that the strong support a third party candidate may receive in the popular vote of a presidential election is sufficiently analogous to a party’s strong support in a district, and thus his message should constitute part of the national interest. The level of support a party and a candidate receives is contingent upon the same condition—that voters will vote their conscience in hopes that the set of interests the party or candidate represents will become law.

Voting one’s conscience will not guarantee compromise, but it will cultivate a political system ripe with varying opinions. Mill cautioned that “popular opinions...are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth.” It is therefore crucial to subject popular opinion to scrutiny in the form of dissent so as to establish a better conception of the truth. Ron Paul champions a set of political interests held by small factions of voters in both parties. He is unelectable; his grim standing in the Republican primary race and the historical impossibility of winning election as a third party candidate make that clear. But voters who genuinely support Paul’s policies should continue to do so. If Paul were to mount a third party run, they should vote their conscience for him—not because they expect to put Paul in office, but because they demand the perpetuation of his message in the nation’s political cognizance to the point of actual action.

Author

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