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Libertarian getting Republican attention

Presidential hopeful draws crowd in Las Vegas

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REVIEW-JOURNAL

In a nondescript meeting room in the convention area of a Strip casino, a love-in was taking place on Saturday.

A crowd of about 350 people was on its feet, whistling, clapping, and chanting their man's name. Banners, T-shirts and bumper stickers bore the words, "Ron Paul REVOLUTION," with the letters "EVOL" backwards and in red: love.

(It happens to be the same gimmick as the Revolution lounge attached to the Beatles-themed Cirque de Soleil show at the MGM Grand, but the Paul campaign says they thought of it first.)

Audience member Elizabeth Belcastro, a 22-year-old Las Vegan who works at the Star Trek Experience, said she did see Paul as preaching love: "love for the country."

Paul, a Republican running for president, also seemed eager to emphasize that, despite his nickname of "Dr. No," his philosophy is not just oppositional -- that his message, like every other presidential candidate's, is one of hope for America.

He talked about improving education and health care and lifting people out of poverty, all of which, he said, could be achieved by government leaving people alone.

Libertarians, he said, must not allow themselves to be portrayed as uncaring.

"We lose the intellectual argument because we allow the other side to say, 'We're the ones who care' ... not realizing they're sowing the seeds of destruction for the liberty they pretend to cherish," he said.

In 1988, Paul ran for president on the Libertarian ticket, but this time, the Texas congressman is trying to win over the Republican Party. His inclusion in Republican televised debates has given him a platform a third-party candidate wouldn't have.

He has stood out in those debates with his distinctive stances, especially his opposition to the war in Iraq and his contention that U.S. foreign policy was partly at fault for the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, both views stemming from his noninterventionist view of foreign affairs.

His nickname comes from the fact that he is a physician and votes against any federal legislation that goes against his strictly literal interpretation of the Constitution. The convergence of two factors -- a Republican base receptive to new messages and the connective power of the Internet -- have catapulted Paul out of political obscurity.

Despite polling in the single digits, Paul claims to have more cash on hand in his campaign account than his better-known rival John McCain, \$2.4 million to \$2 million.

Many of those in the audience Saturday at Paris Las Vegas came from a Las Vegas Paul fan group started on Meetup.com. Paul was in Las Vegas to attend the weekend's FreedomFest convention, but his local supporters got him to do the campaign event as well, and it was standing room only.

The crowd skewed young for the 71-year-old candidate. Many were college students, including University of Nevada, Las Vegas, economics major Brandon Robison, who ran for an Assembly seat as a Libertarian last year.

Robison said he will change his registration to Republican to vote for Paul in the presidential nominating caucuses in January. He also turned his girlfriend, Ashley Mayer, on to Paul's message.

Mayer said she did her own research on Paul and watched him in the debates and was drawn to his argument that U.S. involvement overseas contributed to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It makes sense," she said. "We were in their country trying to police them. We need to bring everybody back and deal with what we have here."

Taking the lectern, Paul said of the enthusiasm his campaign inspires, "I'm really sometimes surprised and bewildered and pleased. And I end up saying, well, it may be that freedom is popular."

In the Paul movement, he noted, "We have conservatives and liberals and libertarians and constitutionalists, and sometimes we even get the anarchists in."

Paul wants to repeal the Patriot Act and ensure that all U.S. prisoners have full access to courts and the right of habeas corpus. He has repeatedly introduced legislation to pull the United States out of the United Nations. He wants to end the welfare system, to phase out Social Security and to abolish public education.

"We have to start reducing the role for government," he said. "Instead of policing the world and running a welfare state, government should be there to protect liberty."

America is spending too much money overseas on policies that masquerade as defense but are actually militarism, he said.

"We need to quit it," he said. "We need to bring our troops home, not only the troops from Iraq, but from Afghanistan, the Middle East, Europe and Korea -- we have troops in 130 countries."

Some of Paul's more obscure positions, like wanting to return American currency to the gold standard, were also hits with the crowd. He got a standing ovation for the line, "We don't want a national ID card."

Victoria Miranda, a Las Vegas involved in the Meetup group, said the group was growing so fast it would soon need a new venue for its monthly meetings.

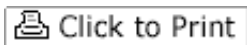
Miranda is five months pregnant with her second child and wore a demure lace jacket and earrings shaped like flowers.

She said she was once a single mother who couldn't afford health care; if the government weren't taking money out of her paycheck and the free market were in charge, she said, she believed she would have been better off.

"I'm only 30 years old and I've never been politically involved," she said. "But what he says just really makes sense to me."

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