

Why Rand Paul's Victory Matters for Republican Foreign Policy

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May 27, 2010

The biggest news stories following Rand Paul's victory in the recent Republican primary for the U.S. Senate seat in Kentucky have focused on his comments regarding his view that the 1964 Civil Rights Act abridged the rights of business owners, his defense of BP regarding the recent oil spill on the grounds that "accidents happen", and that it is wrong to criticize BP or seek to hold them accountable for the spill.

These comments have all but obscured some other implications of Paul's victory. Paul's victory has also been described as a win for the Tea Party movement. While Paul still must win a tough race in November, his primary victory certainly demonstrates that the Tea Party movement is likely to remain an important part of the Republican Party, at least for the short term. This is not without implications for U.S. foreign policy.

If Paul's primary victory is truly a sign of the direction in which the Republican Party is moving, it creates problems not just for moderate Republicans generally, but for the party's foreign policy more specifically. The Republican critique of Obama's foreign policy has been consistent, reasonable and predictable. This critique which, has also frequently been wrong, has generally asserted that Obama has [given in too much to powers like Russia](#) and China, [failed to stand up to threats like that posed by Iran](#), shirked [America's responsibility as the world's moral and political leader](#) and gone too far in his efforts to rebuild U.S. relations with parts of the world where Bush administration policies had contributed to widespread anti-American sentiments.

Implicit in this view is the reductive and ahistorical presumption that Obama is a typical timid, blame America first Democrat; and that as soon as the Republicans get back into power, a muscular and confident America will return to dominate the globe again. Paul's victory, however, indicates the story is not so simple. Paul represents the Libertarian wing of the party and therefore very different view of foreign policy than most of the leadership of the Republican Party. Libertarians have generally advocated for a far more modest U.S. foreign policy, [deemphasizing intervention and urging the U.S. to make fewer overseas commitments, mind its own business more](#), while maintaining a strong national defense. This, needless to say, is quite different from a return to the aggressive neoconservative dominated foreign policy of the Bush era for which so many critics of Obama's foreign policy seem to be calling.

If Paul wins in November, he will obviously not be powerful enough to influence the rest of the senate Republicans regarding the broad direction of foreign policy, but his victory suggests that there is a Republican constituency for a more isolationist foreign policy. This would be consistent with the broader anti-government anger from which

Paul has already benefited. If other Republican primaries are won by candidates who appeal to voters with similar views, the impact on the party will be real and force those who believe Republican victories in 2010 or 2012 will lead to a more aggressive, engaged foreign policy to rethink their assumptions.

Paul's victory, and what it may mean for the future foreign policy of the Republican Party, demonstrates the complex relationship between American foreign policy and party politics. The shorthand explanations which are often used to address this issue, that Republicans are more interventionist, or that Democrats are more hesitant to use military power, are based more on extrapolating from domestic politics than from anything approaching a thoughtful reading of twentieth century history. The Republican Party, for example, has a strong isolationist tendency, to which even President George W. Bush was drawn before September 11th, 2001. If Paul's primary victory represents a possible future for the Republican Party, then it is likely that a new Republican isolationism will be at least part of that future.