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Registering with the voters

Presidential candidate Ron Paul may be little known on the national scene, but in Hillsdale County he is gaining ground

The way people talk around Hillsdale, one would think Ron Paul is leading the polls as the most popular choice for president of the United States.

Others have different names for the Texas congressman, such as maverick, radical, libertarian or Dr. No, the latter because of his refusal to vote for any bill that goes against his interpretation of the Constitution.

But in Hillsdale, support for Paul's campaign is growing, seemingly faster than any other candidate. Road signs supporting him dot the landscape. Supporters gathers at least once a month in town. Even Hillsdale College has a Facebook group with around 100 members solely dedicated to Ron Paul for President.

Why?

"He's the only one who I think really believes in smaller government and less intrusion in our lives," said Mike Clark, an insurance agent in Hilldale.

"He supports liberty and that's a wonderful thing we could use more of right now," said Hillsdale College student Alex Linebrink. "It encourages personal responsibility."

The Libertarian Party has encouraged Paul to seek its nomination — like he did in 1988 — if he is not the Republican party nominee.

But those candidates have begun talking about Paul themselves lately, an indication that his candidacy is gaining traction, said local supporter Peter Cromwell.

"He's bringing in a whole new constituency that hasn't been politically active," Cromwell said. "I've never been enthused enough about any one candidate enough to weigh in like this."

Across the spectrum

Statements like Cromwell's are proof of the populist support that Paul is receiving. Moreover, he seems to be the one candidate that appeals to people across the spectrum.

In addition to Hillsdale College students, local supporters include teachers, business owners, professors, white-collar workers and everyday working people. Like Reagan in 1980, Paul has crossover appeal to Democrats, particularly because of his non-interventionist foreign policy. Although he did vote to invade Afghanistan following Sept. 11, he was one of the six Republicans who voted against invading Iraq. That peace philosophy appeals to some of the more liberal denizens of the Hillsdale area.

"If Ron Paul is elected president, he will not only end the occupation of Iraq, he will end the American practice of throwing bombs and/or dollars at countries all around the world," said Volume One Books owner Richard Wunsch.

Originally from Green Tree, Pa., Paul has represented Texas in the U.S. House from 1976-77, 1979-85 and 1997-present. After graduating from Duke University, he was an obstetrician before becoming an Air Force flight surgeon.

In addition to the non-intervention foreign policy, Paul's voting record supports a smaller government. He advocates withdrawing from the United Nations, ending the federal income tax, abolishing many federal agencies and doing away with the Patriot Act. Paul also is against gun control and the war on drugs and, while he is very pro-life, he feels states should have the right to determine if abortion ought to be legal.

It's a message that plays well in small towns such as Hillsdale, said Hillsdale College economics assistant professor Charles Steele. Areas such as this have a stronger sense of independence among citizens, he said, and so people are quick to follow candidates that support smaller government. "He's the only candidate that has really gotten people involved and excited about the campaign," said Stephen Vear, a Hillsdale accountant who is running for the state House. "There are other groups around here, but none nearly as active and grassroots as Paul's, which I find interesting." Vear stopped short of endorsing a candidate because of his own candidacy, though in the past he has spoken highly of Romney. He said that while Paul may not be leading in the opinion polls, people should support who they feel is right.

"Huckabee was behind Paul two months ago and look where he is now," Vear said. "Nothing is ever a lost cause."

Jeff King, who owns electronics company Aero Data, said while he doesn't agree with all of Paul's opinions he feels Paul is by far the best candidate for the job.

"I know where he stands and i don't have to worry about him changing his mind," King said. "That appeals to a lot of voters."

Voters like Carrie Burdzinski, an area high school teacher who believes that Paul's values and voting record line up with what people in Hillsdale want and what Americans need.

"We know where Ron Paul stands on the issues," she said. "He stands on the side of liberty, respecting the rights and responsibilities of individual Americans."

And Hillsdale resident Cary Champion said Paul is diametrically opposite of most other politicians because he sticks to what he believes and has for his whole career.

"The other Republican candidates are all big government," Champion said. "They don't have policies that could put small government in place ... Ron Paul is more of a Ronald Reagan Republican than Reagan was."

So is he electable?

Steele whole-heartedly supports Paul because of the candidate's small-government philosophy. For him and others, Paul's desire to strictly follow the Constitution and keep the federal government at a manageable level while returning some rights to the states, such as abortion legality is what America needs.

"He seems to be the only one who is serious about actually cutting government and keeping it restrained to its proper sphere," Steele said. "He is consistent on cutting spending." Politically, conservatives tend to believe in smaller government and more fiscal responsibility, but in recent years conservative has come to be defined by a stance on moral issues, such as abortion. On those points, Paul definitely leans right, as he favors overturning Roe v. Wade. But in addition, Steele said Paul is closest to the original ideals of conservative thought which is why, perhaps, Hillsdale likes him so much.

"My guess is that people here take the 'less government' idea seriously," he said. "People understand that when a community works together, things work well. We don't need a big government controlling every part of our lives."

Because of the crossover appeal, King said Republicans should look seriously at Ron Paul if there is a hope of beating the Democratic nominee in the fall.

"He'll be the best popular choice, not the best choice for special interests," King said. "The only way they will win is if they attract crossover votes like Reagan did."

Sadly, Clark said many in America won't consider Ron Paul because of some misconceptions, most likely that he is a member of the libertarian party. What's more, nobody will take the time to figure out what a libertarian is, he said. "Absolutism will get you in trouble," he added. "He comes way closer to the (Republican) platform than anybody else out there."

And if Paul can get the continued grassroots support he's been getting, Cromwell said, people will eventually see that he's not the "wild-eyed radical with bizarre ideas" that Cromwell said some peg Paul as. In fact, he said they may see that Ron Paul is the best choice for not only Hillsdale, but for America.

"When we started the government as a sugar daddy and this 'how big a place can you carve for yourself at the public trough,' things started to go downhill," he said. "This guy has walked the walk consistently, but so many people are so jaded that they can't believe

what he's done. They call him Dr. No in Congress because he doesn't go along with any of their shenanigans... It's funny and sad that someone who actually respects the oath is thought of like that."

The Hillsdale for Ron Paul group will sponsor its next meetup in the Kroger conference room at 3 p.m. Sunday. Voter registration will take place, as the last day for city voters to register is Monday to vote in the Jan. 15 primary.

To find out more about the candidate, visit www.ronpaul2008.com or www.ontheissue.org/Ron_Paul.htm. Some, like Burdzinski, would argue that voting this year is more important than any election in recent history.

"The outcome will determine whether our country will experience a return to the classical American ideals described by our founding fathers, or whether we will continue down a path of fascism disguised as patriotism," she said.

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