From libertarian to 'Ron Paul' Republican

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Amid the footballs and Frisbees and flags flying over the soccer field at the National Sports Center in Blaine; among the young families sitting on blankets, the older couples comfortably ensconced in canvas lawn chairs, the people of all ages decked out in revolutionary-era garb, Ron Paul and anti-war T-shirts, and red, white and blue in a cacophony of fashion statements, a bald head bobbed along the lengthy beer line snaking along what is normally a soccer field sideline. John Cunningham, looking every bit the 52-year-old Republican (alternate) delegate he is in a gray suit and conservative tie, passed out his campaign literature at the Ron Paul Nation Celebration on Monday night. While rock and country singers entertained the assembly (estimated by stadium personnel at between 3,000 and 5,000), Cunningham worked the crowd, making the case why he should be the congressman from the 7th District in Massachusetts.

"I've been to Ron Paul rallies around the country, and I've gotten donations and even recruited volunteers," said Cunningham explaining why a Massachusetts candidate would be campaigning a thousand miles from home. "'Liberty Republicans' support the idea of freedom and candidates that support Dr. Paul's philosophy wherever they are running," he said. "Today, you can set up a phone bank anywhere."

Cunningham, who says he grew up in a conservative family and became a self-described libertarian at age 15 when he first read Ayn Rand, has worked for and donated "thousands of dollars" to the Libertarian Party. In 1980 he ran for Congress has a "Big L" Libertarian. He got his 3 percent of the vote. But Ron Paul's entry in the presidential race as a Republican re-energized him to make another run for Congress.

The liberty message

"As a Ron Paul Republican, I have a chance," said Cunningham, laughing. "It is liberal Massachusetts," he said, "so maybe not much of a chance, but a chance." And he noted that when he takes his campaign literature into a blue-collar bar in Democratic areas of his district and talks about following the Constitution, stopping government meddling in the affairs of other nations and bringing the troops home, keeping the government out of our private lives, stopping government from raiding the Social Security system and retuning America to sound money and reducing the national debt, his message is well-received."
"The man on the street responds to the liberty message," he said. "After hearing my pitch, people ask if I'm a Democrat or a Republican," he said. So why is he a Republican?

"It goes to fiscal issues," Cunningham says. "Fiscal conservatism is a pre-existing condition in the Republican Party, even when it's ignored, that isn't even part of the thinking of the Democratic Party. The Republican Party has been taken over by social conservatives with a different agenda, but fiscal conservatism is still a core Republican principle."

Cunningham is typical of many self-described libertarians who are finding a new political home in the GOP without mortgaging their libertarian principles.

"Ron Paul has energized a lot people and brought them into the Republican Party," said Cunningham, "But it is the ground work laid by libertarians over the past 40 years that made the Ron Paul revolution possible. A year ago, a lot of the people here would have identified themselves as 'libertarians.' Today they say they are 'Ron Paul Republicans.' I say I'm a 'Ron Paul Republican' — but it's always a Ron Paul Republican."

"We're out to change the Republican Party," said Cunningham, "to bring it back to what it used to be — the party of individual freedom that follows the Constitution." Cunningham knows that won't be an easy task, but at least, as he said, there's a chance.