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Ted Cruz of Texas Eyes Evangelicals as He Kicks Off Presidential Bid in Virginia

In jumping first, Cruz will try to steer attention, money and social conservatives' support his way to take the anti-establishment lead.

By Margaret Talev, Jonathan Allen, and David Weigel

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Senator Ted Cruz's plan to announce his run for president on Monday at Liberty University is an acknowledgement by the Texas freshman, firebrand and tea-party candidate of just how difficult a path he faces to the Republican nomination and how crucial it may be for him to break out first and seize attention early.

By choosing to mark the official start of his campaign at the Virginia Christian college founded by the late evangelist Jerry Falwell, rather than a venue in his home state, Cruz is signaling he'll court religious conservatives as well as small-government tea-party activists as he competes to become the lead anti-establishment candidate in the party contest.

The timing and focus may help Cruz, who lacks the major Wall Street backing of hopefuls such as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, build a national donor base for the \$40 million to \$50 million he'll seek for a primary. While Cruz is unlikely to draw away early support from establishment-aligned hopefuls such as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie or Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, his immediate task is pull supporters away from candidates who've shown strength with evangelical voters; namely, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, and neurosurgeon Ben Carson.

In a crowded field of anti-establishment presidential hopefuls, Cruz has been stuck in the single digits in Bloomberg Politics polls this year in the key nominating states of Iowa and New Hampshire. He also placed a distant third at last month's Conservative Political Action Conference straw poll, behind Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky and Walker. He's trying to change that dynamic and get out ahead of rivals like Paul, who was expected to announce a presidential bid April 7 in Louisville, Ky. Still, history hasn't generally been kind to the first-out crowd. A

Bloomberg Politics analysis last year found that no first announcer has won the election since at least 1952.

By skipping the exploratory phase of a presidential campaign and jumping right in, Cruz, the Canadian-born son of a Cuban immigrant, will become the first major Republican candidate to formally enter the race. After his announcement, he's expected to return to the Senate to work through the week, then hit the campaign trail over the weekend.

Cruz, 44, already has shown some mastery of timing and oratory and a political fearlessness in the face of his many critics and enemies inside his own party's leadership. Senator John McCain once dismissed Cruz as of the chamber's "wacko birds" though McCain later apologized. Elected in 2012, Cruz gained notoriety with his first year on the job after a 21-hour performance on the Senate floor in opposition to Obamacare that including reading "Green Eggs and Ham," and his role in a government shutdown.

At CPAC last month, he said the way for Republicans to win in 2016 is, "We reassemble the Reagan coalition. We bring together fiscal conservatives and social conservatives and national security conservatives. We stand strong for economic growth. But we also stand for life and marriage. We defend constitutional rights but we also stand and lead the fight against ISIS and a nuclear Iran.

"The way we get to 51 percent is we bring together conservatives and libertarians and evangelicals, and women and young people and Hispanics and Reagan Democrats."

Cruz's rollout may nudge other campaigns to a faster start. It also may turn the focus of the debate toward issues he promotes from smaller government to a more hawkish approach on foreign policy.

Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, said Cruz is "probably well-positioned for most parts of the Republican Party outside of Wall Street." Pratt also said if his group endorses a primary candidate, Cruz is a likely choice. "He's definitely already been in the fight for us," Pratt said. That commitment to gun-owners rights should help Cruz in the early primary caucus states of Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. "It's a very favorable 1-2-3 set of venues for Cruz."

Cruz's strategists argue that he can lock down conservative support and win over the evangelical voters who previously backed the campaigns of insurgents like Huckabee and Santorum. In March 2013, just two months into his Senate career, he met with Iowa conservative Bob Vander Plaats about coming to the state. Vander Plaats's reach to conservative voters and crucial pre-caucus endorsement of Santorum has given him a sort of kingmaker status.

“He was already a little bit concerned about what it would look like if he made moves in Iowa that early,” said Vander Plaats. “I convinced him to come out because it would give him the biggest microphone.”

A few months later, Cruz spoke at Vander Plaats’s Iowa Family Leader summit. He was accompanied by his father and unofficial faith ambassador, Pastor Rafael Cruz. In later speeches and interviews, he’d pledged to protect Christians from threats to their “religious liberty” from the advances of contraception mandates and gay rights.

“He’s that rare candidate who’ll energize not just social conservatives, but the Americans for Prosperity conservatives,” said Vander Plaats. “If the caucuses were held today, notwithstanding what the polls say, I believe he’d be in the top three with a ticket to New Hampshire. I always remind people, 75 percent of Iowans didn’t want Romney to be the nominee. It’d be great if conservatives in general could rally behind a full spectrum conservative. People are wiser this time.”

By announcing with a bang at the near-end of a financial reporting quarter, Cruz hopes to raise a bigger sum than any comparable candidate, and, ideally, to crack the \$1 million mark. Cruz has already won over Fort Worth money manager Hal Lambert, who backed former Texas Governor Rick Perry's 2012 bid. He's also courted some of the evangelical donors who backed the Huckabee and Santorum campaigns. (A question to Santorum donor Foster Friess was returned with an apology: “Foster’s focus is on helping to arm the Kurds so he will not be considering any new projects for several months.”)

Kellyanne Conway, a pollster who has spoken with several of the Republican hopefuls, including Cruz, said he is "smart to be actively running and not quote 'exploring'" because there's no reason to "pussyfoot around when you can adhere to principles right here, right now."

Conway argues that Cruz's appeal as a champion for conservative causes will become more evident as voters familiarize themselves with the records, statements and positions of a crowded field of Republicans. "I don't think he has to be the most conservative," she said. "He just needs to be the proven conservative."

Perhaps most important, Bush's failure to connect with the party's base has left openings for Republicans with lower name identification to jump into the race and make their cases to an electorate that remains largely undecided.

"The explosive rise and subsequent challenge of Walker's candidacy shows that A) plenty of Republican rank-and-file voters are skeptical of a third Bush candidacy, especially if there is to be a second Clinton candidacy, and B) nobody's been scared out of the race," she said. "The third Bush versus the first woman is not a fair fight."

Showing that strength could distinguish Cruz from the other candidates reaching out to evangelical voters. Huckabee and Santorum were weak fund-raisers in the run-up to their Iowa wins, and Carson has never previously run for office.

“He’s a terrific guy, and I’m delighted that he’s announcing and getting in,” said Carson in a Sunday interview. “I think the more the merrier—we need to select the best possible candidate, and the only way we’re going to winnow it down is by people putting themselves forward for the voters.”

Carson’s political advisors stress that the two men are friends, that they’ve dined together with their spouses in Carson’s vacation home of Palm Beach, and that the doctor did not intend to go negative on any potential rival. Indeed, Carson only edged toward a critique of the Texas senator when asked about the 2013 stand-off over the funding of the Affordable Care Act. Cruz, who had campaigned around the country to cut the funding, helped bring about a government shutdown; fellow Republicans abandoned it under pressure, with no impact on the law.

“He’s courageous,” Carson said. “He’s willing to stand up for what he believes in. That to me seems to be a vanishing trait in our society. Whether you go about that without forming a coalition first, that’s another question.”

Cruz’s skeptics—and there are many in the GOP—brought up his lack of concrete Senate victories right away. Strategists for potential 2016 rivals see Cruz as a reliable and opportunistic ally of the groups that set up endless litmus tests for conservatives, setting up most Republicans to fail while a few members of the party can cast pure “no” votes. Fergus Cullen, a former chairman of the New Hampshire Republican Party, hosted Bush at his home this month, then told a radio interview that Cruz would never “darken my doorstep.”

“Here’s a question: How many of his Senate colleagues will endorse him?” asked Cullen, who had met Cruz in 2010 at a Heritage Foundation conference and soured on him after seeing his work in the Senate. “There’s a significant block of votes for the I-don’t-give-a-damn candidate. They’re not interested in someone with accomplishments. They’re interested in someone who fights. If Ted Cruz’s strategy is to be the most conservative candidate and unite the right wing, he’ll be a finalist—but the problem is that lots of candidates have tried that, and failed. The only person I can think of who tried and succeeded was Pat Buchanan in 1996.”

Unlike Huckabee or Santorum, who have openly warred with libertarians, Cruz has spent time courting the “liberty movement.” He joined Paul’s 2013 filibuster that demanded a legal rationale for the Obama administration’s use of drones in warfare; he had spoken at events organized by Young Americans for Liberty, which was started by Paul’s father.

“Cruz could potentially have some appeal to libertarians,” said David Boaz, the executive vice president of the Cato Institute, and the author of *The Libertarian Mind*. “But it seems to me that when you announce your candidacy at Jerry Falwell’s college, you’re really shooting for a very

narrow base. Lots of candidates announce in Iowa or New Hampshire, or in their home states. Obama announced at a Lincoln-connected site. Cruz is announcing at the Vatican of fundamentalism. That doesn't seem like the path to a winning coalition, even within the GOP."

Dan Schnur, the director of the University of Southern California's Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics, said that "it's hard to imagine a scenario in which Ted Cruz becomes the Republican nominee.

"It's just as hard to imagine a scenario in which he does not pull the primary debate significantly to the right," Schnur said.

It's not yet clear whether Cruz's platform will create a challenge or an opportunity for the eventual nominee if it isn't Cruz. "It depends on whether Cruz becomes a magnet or a foil," Schnur said.

If it's the former, a Republican nominee could be drawn so far to the right in the primary that it's hard to appeal to swing voters in the general election. In the latter scenario, a winning candidate could calibrate himself or herself as a more mainstream conservative than Cruz. The difficulty for Cruz, which may be evident in Monday's speech, is making himself the favorite candidate of powerful factions within the party.

"Exactly what does he say in that speech that encourages his audience to support him over Mike Huckabee?" Schnur said. "Similarly, what does he say to a Tea Party audience that encourages them to support him over Rand Paul?"

The only first announcers to secure nominations since the second half of the 20th century were Democrats Adlai Stevenson in 1956 and George McGovern in 1972.

—Ali Elkin and Elizabeth Titus contributed to this report.