



Rand Paul would have enlarged GOP tent

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Sen. Rand Paul's presidential campaign has ended, like most presidential campaigns, short of the White House. The Republican debate will be poorer without him.

Polls show substantial support for libertarian ideas in the Republican Party. Gallup found that libertarian strength in the GOP had risen from 15% in 2002 to 34% in 2012. In two surveys in 2012 and 2013, David Kirby, then at FreedomWorks, found libertarians were 35% or 41% of the party.

Paul obviously didn't capture that vote. The senator of Kentucky had trouble triangulating between his own strongly libertarian views and what he thought Republican voters, especially in evangelical Iowa, wanted. The rise of the Islamic State terrorist group and its bloody videos in the summer of 2014 made it more difficult to sell non-interventionist ideas on foreign policy. Donald Trump and Ted Cruz in different ways appealed to the angrier and more conservative-leaning segment of libertarians. And despite a news media perception that libertarians draw heavy support from billionaires, Paul attracted few of the seven-figure donations that flowed to Cruz, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio and Hillary Clinton.

Both in the Senate and in the presidential race, Paul brought new ideas and a fresh perspective to the Republican debate. Most of the GOP candidates are just 50 shades of Reagan-Bush. Neoconservative, social conservative, establishment conservative — they all stayed in a pretty narrow lane on most issues.

Paul brought something new to the table. He said he wanted to "defend the whole Bill of Rights," not just the Second Amendment's right to bear arms. He pushed Republicans to question the mass surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden. He joined Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., to reform excessive prison sentences, which led to a bill introduced by Senate Judiciary

Committee Chairman Charles Grassley, Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn and others that could well pass the Senate this spring.

On conservative talk shows and in front of all-white audiences, Paul repeatedly spoke like this: “There are many people in our country, particularly minorities, who aren't being treated fairly. They're not getting due process. They're not getting a speedy trial. I think if we showed equal deference and love for the Fifth Amendment and the Sixth Amendment, and the Fourth Amendment, the right to privacy, all of a sudden, there's a whole new group of people, young kids, college kids, African Americans — who are going to say, 'You know what? That's the party I want to belong to.’”

On foreign policy, while the other candidates tried to top one another with uber-hawkishness — Trump's “bomb the s--- out of them,” Cruz's gleam at making “sand glow in the dark,” Rubio's proposal to send U.S. troops into yet another country — Paul cautioned that interventionism hadn't worked very well in recent decades.

Perhaps unfortunately for his campaign, he blurred his message by denouncing President Obama's Iran nuclear deal and calling for a declaration of war against ISIL. But as the conservative writer Michael Brendan Dougherty pointed out, Paul eschewed the flat-out non-interventionism of his father for a sort of Fabian realism: “Paul often offers rhetorical hostility instead of sanctions, sanctions instead of conflict, and limited constitutionally authorized conflict instead of open-ended war.”

With Paul gone from the presidential race, so is the voice for realism and prudence in foreign policy. So is a passionate voice on criminal justice reform and overcriminalization.

And that revived Republican Party that Paul talked about, the one that “a whole new group of people, young kids, college kids, African Americans” might “want to belong to”? Well, between Trump's immigrant-bashing and Cruz's embrace of anti-gay hysteria, that's gone too, at least for this year.

The good news for libertarian-leaning voters — and for anyone who cares about out-of-control federal spending, the Bill of Rights, mass incarceration, mass surveillance or wars without end — is that Rand Paul is still a U.S. senator and likely to win another term this fall.

The White House's loss will be the Senate's gain. And, hopefully, America's gain, as Paul continues his effort to rally Americans on these issues and to work with senators of both parties to make progress toward smaller government and more liberty.

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