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Rand Paul would have enlarged GOP tent

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

Paul didn't capture that vote. The senator from Kentucky had trouble triangulating between his libertarian views and what he thought GOP voters, especially in evangelical Iowa, wanted.

The rise of the Islamic State terrorist group and its bloody videos 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.

What Paul did do is bring new ideas and a fresh perspective.

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.

On conservative talk shows and in front of all-white audiences, Paul repeatedly said, "There are many people in our country, particularly minorities, who aren't being treated fairly. ... 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 seeing whether "sand can 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.

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 GOP, the one that “a whole new group of people, young kids, college kids, African Americans” might want to belong to? That has gone too, at least for this year.

The good news is that Paul is still a senator, likely to win another term this fall. And hopefully, that will be America’s gain, as Paul continues to work with senators of both parties to make progress toward smaller government and more liberty.

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