



Rand Paul kicks off presidential campaign

The senator from Kentucky aims for broad appeal with ‘libertarianish’ candidacy

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April 7, 2015

After months of laying the groundwork for a presidential campaign, Rand Paul, the junior senator from Kentucky, made it official on Tuesday morning, announcing his 2016 candidacy on his website.

"I am running for president to return our country to the principles of liberty and limited government," he wrote.

In a [video released by his political action committee](#), Rand PAC, teasing the announcement Sunday night, he was touted as a “different kind of Republican,” one who plans to “defeat the Washington machine and unleash the American dream” — a subtle jab at expected contenders in the Republican primary and the general election Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton, both of whom are members of the D.C. establishment.

With his bid for the Republican nomination, Paul appears to be consciously positioning himself to win over the GOP base as well as the general electorate with traditional conservatism with a libertarian bent. The senator has described himself as “[libertarianish](#).”

“If you want to win, everything has to work, and that means you have to be conservative and excite the base but then also have issues where you go beyond that,” Paul said during a visit to

New Hampshire in late March. “I think you can be a good, strong conservative and then take [a] liberty message to the people without compromising that message.”

Elected to the Senate in 2010 in the tea-party Republican wave, he has worked for the last four years to burnish an idiosyncratic, bridge-building political brand, including staking out positions in areas outside the GOP wheelhouse. In 2013 he mounted a [nearly 13-hour filibuster](#) railing against the White House’s [policy on drone strikes](#), particularly [those targeting American citizens](#), and has been a fierce critic of the [National Security Agency’s surveillance dragnet](#). He has been one of the most outspoken advocates in the GOP for [criminal justice reform](#), co-sponsoring legislation with Democratic colleagues that would rein in mandatory minimums and help ex-offenders find work. And he has conspicuously done outreach to African-American voters, arguing that free-market principles are a better cure for generational poverty than liberal safety net policies and [speaking out against police militarization](#). At the same time, he has railed against the national debt and called for lower taxes and regulations.

“He’s not been content just to give speeches. He’s introduced amendments. He’s offered to negotiate with the White House and with Democrats,” said David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute and the author of “The Libertarian Mind.” “Now as a presidential candidate, I think it’s clear he’s thinking about ‘How do you build a majority both within the Republican Party and then in the general election for a libertarianish agenda?’ So that makes him talk about issues in a more tempered and politically pragmatic way.”

Fergus Cullen, a Republican political operative in New Hampshire, said Paul’s campaign may find momentum in the Granite State, where former Rep. Ron Paul, Rand Paul’s father, won 23 percent of the primary vote in 2012. Cullen added that Rand Paul’s talk of appealing to new constituencies is an approach more candidates should adopt.

“Rand seems to understand if he’s going to become president, he’s going to have find votes from non-Republicans,” he said. “I love that he’s talking about expanding Republicans’ reach and appeal. That is specifically [not what Ted Cruz is doing](#). He’s alienating vast parts of the general electorate.”

Rand Paul has taken care to publicly distance himself from the message of his father, who ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination in 2008 and 2012, attracting a vociferous grass-

roots following with a more purist libertarian platform. Ron Paul was an opponent of nearly all foreign interventions, believed that Social Security was unconstitutional and led a quixotic quest to abolish the Federal Reserve. Rand Paul, who worked on many of his father's campaigns and grew up steeped in libertarian political tradition, has staked out more pragmatic positions and tried to downplay some of his libertarian roots. For instance, while he has expressed wariness of protracted foreign entanglements, he courted [defense hawks](#) last month, offering an amendment that would increase the Pentagon budget by \$190 billion over two years, with offsets included.

"I don't see see Sen. Paul as a libertarian candidate," said Texas state Sen. Don Huffines, a longtime family friend of the Pauls. "I see him as a true principled conservative Republican and I think other Republicans are also going to see him that way."

Still, Walter Block, an economics professor at Loyola College and a fellow at the free-market Mises Institute, with which Ron Paul is affiliated, rated Rand Paul a 7 on the libertarian scale and Ron Paul at about a 9.

"He's the most libertarian senator we've got and maybe that we've ever had, and he's the most libertarian of the people being mentioned for president," he said. "I'm very grateful for him running."

Boaz too said that Rand Paul's candidacy represents an inflection point for the libertarian movement, with an increasing number of voters attracted to a political philosophy that is skeptical of Big Government in the wake of Wall Street bailouts, the Iraq War and the abuses of the NSA. Paul's campaign will test how far libertarian ideas can go in the Republican Party.

"I don't know how well his moderate nonintervention or his realism will play with Republicans, because it hasn't been tested yet, but there's a chance we're going to find out that not all Republicans get their talking points from Fox News," Boaz said. "I think there's going to be some Republicans who agree with a guy that says, 'Let's be more serious and cautious when we think about intervention.'"

But Paul has tread into controversial territory by taking his skepticism of government to its farthest implications. He [mused aloud on MSNBC](#) about whether the Civil Rights Act should apply to private institutions — a stance taken by his father — although he later clarified that

federal intervention was needed on the issue of racial discrimination in the 1960s. He argued this year, in the midst of a measles outbreak, that [most vaccinations should be voluntary](#), even though he thought they are a good idea. This month, video surfaced of [Paul saying in 2013](#) that he didn't believe in gay rights because he didn't believe "in rights based on your behavior."

Scott Lasley, an associate professor of political science at Western Kentucky University and a county GOP chairman in the state, said fumbles like the vaccination comments could ensnare Paul during a long nominating contest. Lasley added that Paul's courting of young, moderate and African-American voters would need to be bolstered by more than just talk.

"It's not like flipping a switch," he said. "It could be helpful in branding himself as a different kind of Republican. But from a practical standpoint — that's more long term, down the road."